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THQ's Xbox 360 Triple Threat

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In-depth and behind the scenes with three of the year's most exciting Xbox 360 games

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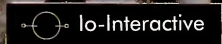
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PlayStation 2



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Letter from the Editor

This that and the other thing

What a strange year this has been so far. At this time last year we were knee-deep in some of the best console games ever created, yet here we are a year later, presumably on the brink of a new generation and all we can think about are our PSPs, DSes (DS Lite!!) and PS2s. Okay, so we're crazy about Tomb Raider: Legend and a handful of 360 games, but it still seems like the next generation won't be arriving until mid to late 2006, early 2007. Not that we're counting the 360 out (on the contrary, things are about to get really good, followed by great, and all the developers we've spoken with love the thing), but when you've got a new Super Mario Bros. and spanking new Ultimate Ghosts 'n' Goblins headed for handheld, and the likes of Okami, FF XII, Dirge of Cerberus, Phantasy Star Universe, and Kingdom Hearts 2, fighting for your PS2, it's hard to think about much else. But what I really want to touch on is the mobile scene of late. Aside from the upcoming new Mario and Ghouls, mobile gaming seems to be reaching a new plateau. Due to a combination of lower development costs, more creative freedom, and a longer shelf life, mobile games are beginning to gain on, and in some cases surpass, the quality of console games. What the DS initially lacked in software it has more than made up for, and it's only just getting started, and with the advent of the DS Lite, any design issues have gone sailing out the window. Meanwhile Sony seems to be

where Nintendo was a year ago: following up a post-launch software trickle with a deluge of super-impressive games across multiple genres. Put it this way: I've never had editors lining up to do handheld stuff until now. So the big question is obviously whether or not Microsoft will throw its hat into the ring and use E3 to announce a little buddy for the Xbox 360. Console connectivity coupled with retail strides such as the ability to download demos in store (coming soon for your DS) are making it almost mandatory. Tapwave, N-Gage, and Gizmondo (whose shattered dream is now a skid mark on PCH) are proof positive it doesn't work otherwise, but Microsoft needs to complete its transformation as the new Sega and give us one more piece of Game Gear. They also need to wake up and smell the necessity of stable of 1st-party brands. There's a storm a-comin'.

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief



Art by: LeSean Thomas

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Check out Exteel and our first edition of Ask Alienware, the Q&A where Alienware answers your queries each month.

Nick and Dai make us all jealous

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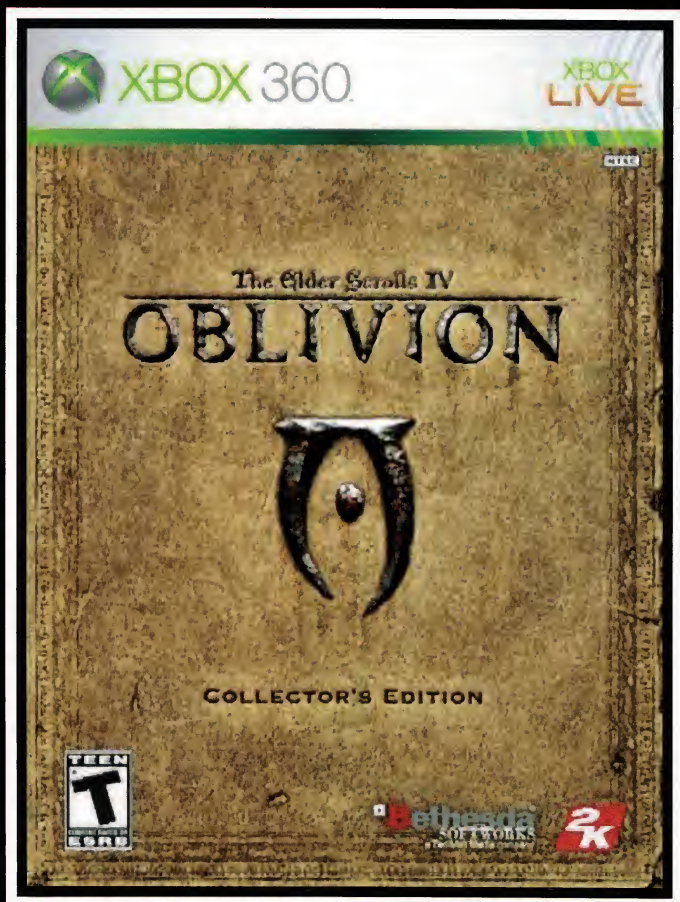
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LETTER OF THE MONTH

Failure to Launch

Hi Play staff! You know, I want to share a story with you; it's about me and my 360. Well, like any gamer who has been around for a while (been playing games for 15 years) I am always excited about the launch of new consoles, in fact, I have been a part of every launch since the Sega Saturn. So I wanted an Xbox 360, preordered way early got "the" call that I was getting one on day one and sat patiently and waited for what was sure to be gaming bliss. Wrong! I go to the store and pick up my console and started playing Kameo, since I am a sucker for those kinds of games. Well, my 360 broke 4 days after launch. I have had five Xbox 360 replacement units (four from Microsoft and one new one from my EB, which I swapped out for my old one because the new one worked worse than the old) and went over 2 months without being able to play a game on it. Now as I sit here with a unit that works half the time (thanks for a glitchy interface MS) I really ask myself, why do I not care to play it? I packed up all my older systems in their boxes for their hibernation and was ready to move on to next-gen. Bought an HD TV and thought I was ready. Now I sit here and think "was Sony right?" Is this Xbox 1.5? I played Perfect Dark and was extremely disappointed with it, graphically it was not what I expected but more importantly the gameplay was 10 years stale. So much for this launch window, there are no games I am interested in coming out. I really want Frame City Killer, Dead Rising, and Gears of War, all of which are at least 7 months off. That's of course assuming that all those games are actually good. Well, I could always play my old Xbox games that I love so much. NOT! The games that I would want to replay are not "supported," games like Voodoo Vince, Grabbed by the Ghoulies, Panzer Dragoon, Shenmue 2, even the Ninja Gaidens and Fables don't run properly on the 360. No, they can't support good games, but they have 100% compatibility with Barbie Horse Adventure (I am not kidding about that). So let's see, I have a 360 that works half of the time, a lack of backwards compatibility, an HDTV that's features are not being used, a good chunk of the launch games beat, no new game I would want for 7+ months. That's well over 2 grand that I am just not getting a return on. So Xbox 1.5 or not? I think

not, because 1.5 would have been at least a half step up from what we had, no we get a 360: a console going in circles. So what am I doing about it? Playing my PS2 and all the games I neglected to buy because of this supposed next generation. Games like Dragon Quest 8, Shadow of the Colossus, and Devil May Cry 3 SE. So what do you think about this Play staff? Has the big MS pulled a Dreamcast but this time worse because half of the games are either bad or half-baked ports with a 10-dollar increase on them? Well, thanks for listening. Now if you will excuse me I have slimes to fight.

Tom

Honestly, it's too early to tell, although all roads point to a similar (if that's good) situation. 360 was over in Japan before it started, and is now pretty much officially

"Well, I could always play my old Xbox games that I love so much. NOT!"

dead, and with the Revolution on track to be the "gamer's" system and Sony's penchant for world domination (supported by breakthrough cell technology and the best 1st-party core in all of gamedom) the number three spot seems imminent for the X-squad. Microsoft's bet that casual gamers and newcomers that want to fiddle about online would somehow equate to a "billion" users, never seemed like a safe, or intelligent one. However, unlike Sega circa the Dreamcast (which had a far more exciting launch and amazing 1st-party support), they have the deep pockets to do a 180 on 360 and refocus on gamers and building their own brands. The decision to "empower" 3rd parties is madness. They'll port games until the cows come home and then starve in the barn. The good news is that the hardware is capable of truly great things (when it works). Let's just hope they can get their best to market and sort out these pesky bugs before Sony and Nintendo start raining on their parade.

No room in the Tomb?

Everywhere I turn, I see critical praise for

Tomb Raider: Legend. They applaud how it has returned to its roots, going back to the Lara we know and love, talking of how Angel of Darkness, the last installment of Tomb Raider, should be forgotten. I would be more inclined to agree with them, if I hadn't been a fan of Tomb Raider for the past five years. If I hadn't discovered the original games, and hadn't bought—and adored every play through—Angel of Darkness.

It feels so much like a case of 1984, in which the past is rewritten by those in power and everyone believes and goes along with it.

Part of Lara Croft's appeal has always been her rebellious background. Going against her parents' wishes and being disowned. Now what do we find, but Crystal Dynamics rewriting this very part of her history?

Tomb Raider fans have never spoken ill of

Lara's biography; indeed, they've fretted when changes were made to it in the case of the Tomb Raider films, comics, and novels.

But to go back and rewrite everything that makes Lara herself, and ignore the previous six games (all of which I consider great games, Angel of Darkness being my favorite due to its amazing storyline that never reached full potential because of bad decisions made by Eidos—not Core's part), how is this keeping the fans in mind? How is this giving the fans what they want?

They may be attempting to appeal to a new audience, but to so selfishly neglect the audience that has been faithful to Eidos to this point is a gross injustice. Had it not been for the faithful fans, buying each new game as it came out and loving it, Eidos would not have the empire it has today; built with the popularity of this heroine we all adored and couldn't get enough of.

I was able to overlook their change of Lara's hair colour, physique, and outfit. I was able to deal with the storyline they wrote for the new game—a bland, cliché thrill ride through a clone of the first game, with better graphics.

But to take ten years of Tomb Raider history and throw it all away, to give Lara a new past, a new voice, a new personality all together...to revert to that Lara that fans watched on the silver screen and despised...

What I can't understand is why Crystal wants to bring in elements from the movies in the first place, given that they didn't perform well critically, weren't popular with most fans, and in the case of Cradle of Life, didn't even do well financially. It boggles the mind.

I can't help but feel disgusted by Eidos, Core Design, and Toby Gard (who merely created her image, and deserves none of the praise he's received). They've ruined our Lara, for the sake of money.

I, for one, don't know why they didn't just write an entirely new character if they have so little respect for the Lara we all love already.

And if Legend, upon release, crashes and burns and is revealed for what it is—a mere remake of Tomb Raider 1 with updated graphics—I can't help but say that, as a Tomb Raider fan, I will laugh. Laugh that a game that could have been amazing will never reach the heights that games like Metal Gear Solid or Silent Hill have—true genius.

Enjoy your Lara while she lasts, Eidos. I suspect her time is drawing to a close.

-Andrea C

Trust us when we say that the new Tomb Raider is a rebirth worth getting excited about. We're embarking on a new strain of adventures that combine the best of the old with many, much needed refinements. True fans will see the light soon enough but more over newcomers will come to know a Tomb Raider to enjoy through the next generation and beyond. And this comes from the magazine that gave AoD a B+. Angel of Darkness sold well over a million copies which would have made it a top-3 game overall in 2005—the only problem was that most happy gamers don't go diving into festering dog piles online. The million-plus sales speak much louder than the tiny group who always go searching for chinks in the armor. Thank Jan De Bont for killing our buzz with Cradle of Life. The first film wasn't so bad. Maybe we'll get the CG film that it should have been, if all goes well.



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PlayStation 2





Nintendo DS Lite!

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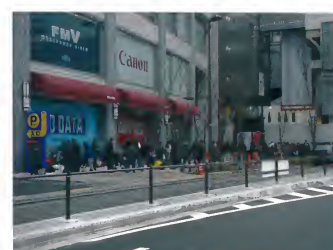
Heeding the need for a sleeker, more visually popping DS, on March 2, Nintendo released the handheld's replacement with the DS Lite. In typical Japanese fashion, the launch drew fanatic crowds, who lined up in the early hours of the morning to get their hands on the new system. By 3 AM the day before release, 100 people had already gathered at Yodobashi Camera in Akihabara, with over 500 waiting by the store's opening (by comparison, the same store drew 7 gamers for the Xbox 360). With 400 people lined up at Bic Camera in Yurakucho and 600 at Bic Camera in Ikebukuro, the lines recalled the furor of the PSP launch—not reaching the same numbers of sales but far exceeding the original DS.

Rumors suggest as few as 10,000 units were available, with most stores receiving three to five units, leaving the giant chains to unload the majority of the sales. Selling for ¥16,800 in stores and ballooning past ¥35,000 in auctions, the Crystal White DS Lite was the only available unit, leaving the Ice Blue and Enamel Navy options for the

new shipments on March 11. Cosmetically, the system looks markedly better. The larger stylus and button changes are a welcome addition to the otherwise more subtle design cues. The big deal here is the remarkably improved screen quality. More than just significantly brighter—four adjustments tailor the illumination for the environment you're in—the screen reveals deeper, richer color saturation and lighting. It's a crazy impact the first time you see it. An official US release date has yet to be announced...



The huge difference in screen quality is immediately apparent.



Ferrari go boom!

How not to drive in real life



In a twist of bizarre irony that only gets more interesting by the update, former Gizmodo executive Stefan Eriksson, whose company lost in upwards of 100 million dollars related to the handheld's demise, crashed his Ferrari on a quiet stretch of Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu, on February 21. When the story first broke, it was revealed that Eriksson, possibly racing a Mercedes SLR, was driving 162 mph before he rammed the million-dollar Enzo into a power pole, severing the car in half. Eriksson, who has been accused of ties to the Swedish mafia in the past, emerged from the wreck practically unscathed—a few drops of blood were found on the airbag—claiming a German acquaintance, going by the name of "Dietrich," was driving. It turns out Eriksson's blood alcohol level was .09, about .01 above the legal limit. In the days following the curious incident, more information began surfacing, like the fact that a Glock handgun magazine was found near the scene. And as most recently reported in the LA Times, minutes after the crash, two gentlemen walked up to authorities and displayed badges, claiming they were from "homeland security," before speaking with Eriksson and leaving. But wait: there's more. Turns out the Enzo—1 of only 400 in the world—is owned by Bank of Scotland, which was preparing to repossess the car.



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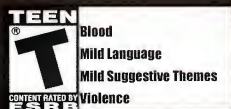
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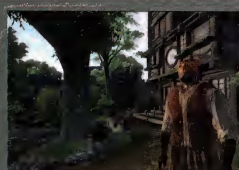
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2K Games, Bethesda / Xb 360

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24: The Game

2K Games / PS2

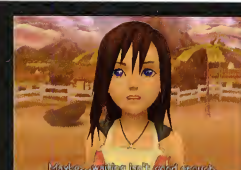
Play a virtual episode of the TV show as you drive, shoot, think and sneak your way through a dangerous LA.



Kingdom Hearts 2

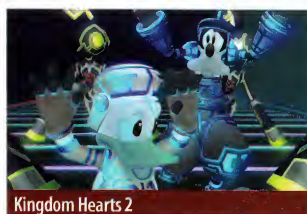
Square Enix / PS2

The Disney and Square universes collide in this wildly anticipated sequel to Kingdom Hearts.



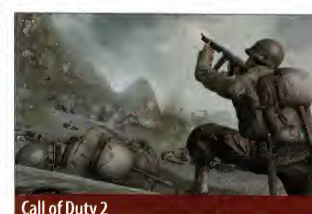
Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	Kingdom Hearts 2 Square Enix / PS2
02	AND 1 Streetball Ubisoft / PS2, Xb
03	Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion 2K Games, Bethesda / Xb 360
04	Burnout Revenge EA / PS2, Xb, Xbox 360
05	Fight Night Round 3 EA / PS2, Xb, Xbox 360
06	Getting Up Contents Under Pressure Atari / PS2, Xb
07	Winning Eleven 9 Konami / PS2, Xb, PSP
08	MLB 2K6 2K Sports / PS2, Xb, Xb 360, GC
09	24: The Game 2K Games / PS2
10	College Hoops 2K6 2K Sports / PS2, Xb, Xb 360

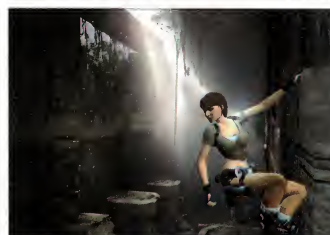


NPD Group Top Ten December Game Sales

01	Call of Duty 2 Activision / Xb 360
02	Madden NFL 06 EA / PS2
03	MVP 06 NCAA Baseball EA / PS2
04	GTA Liberty City Stories Rockstar / PSP
05	Mario Kart DS Nintendo / DS
06	Animal Crossing: Wild World Nintendo / DS
07	Need for Speed: Most Wanted EA / PS2
08	Dead or Alive 4 Tecmo / Xb 360
09	Star Wars Battlefront II Lucas Arts / PS2
10	GTA San Andreas Special Edition Rockstar / PS2



Various



Dave Halverson

01	Tomb Raider: Legend Eidos / Xb 360
02	Daxter SCEA / PSP
03	Okami Capcom / PS2
04	Jet Set Radio Future Sega / Xb
05	Gunstar Heroes Treasure Box Sega / PS2



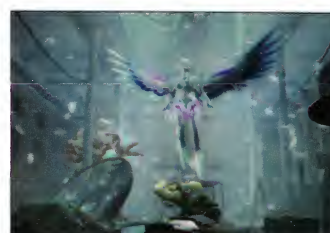
Brady Fiechter

01	Tomb Raider: Legend Eidos / Xb 360
02	Steamboat Chronicles Atlas / PS2
03	Geometry Wars Bizarre Creations / Xb 360
04	Resident Evil: Deadly Silence Capcom / DS
05	Lumines Ubisoft / PSP



Greg Orlando

01	Burnout Revenge 360 EA / Xb 360
02	Tales of Phantasia Namco / GBA
03	Animal Crossing: Wild World Nintendo / DS
04	The Outfit THQ / Xb 360
05	Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: AW Ubisoft / Xb 360



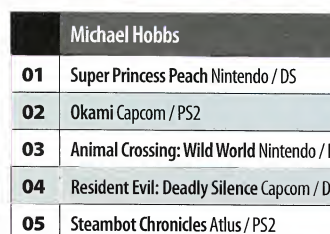
Casey Loe

01	Shadowhearts: From the New World Aruze / PS2
02	Onimusha: Dawn of Dreams Capcom / PS2
03	Suikoden V Konami / PS2
04	Ryu ga Gotoku Sega / PS2
05	Final Fantasy: Dirge of Cerberus square enix / ps2



Nick Des Barres

01	Genso Suikoden V Konami / PS2
02	Rule of Rose Sony / PS2
03	Monster Kingdom: Jewel Summoner Sony / PSP
04	Baten Kaitos II Nintendo / GC
05	Void Drifter Nirgends Microcabin / PC-FX



Michael Hobbs

01	Super Princess Peach Nintendo / DS
02	Okami Capcom / PS2
03	Animal Crossing: Wild World Nintendo / DS
04	Resident Evil: Deadly Silence Capcom / DS
05	Steamboat Chronicles Atlas / PS2



Eric Patterson

01	Tetris DS Nintendo / DS
02	Drill Dozer Nintendo / GBA
03	Pop'n Music 11 company / PS2
04	Resident Evil 4 Capcom / GC
05	Top Shop Tommo / PS

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System(s) Xbox 360

Publisher

THQ

Developer Volition

Available

August

Saint's Row

Deliver us from evil

Y

words Dave Halverson

ou begin Saint's Row (after carefully sculpting the new you into anything from a normal Joe to a rotund, muscle-bound freak) as a nobody, enjoying the canned advances of a resident hooker...right up until you find your freshly hand-crafted cranium staring down the barrel of a semi-automatic—which is where Julius (played with trademark zeal by Keith David) comes in. After saving your plain-wrapped ass (find a Sloppy Seconds and dress yourself proper, immediately) the leader of the 3rd Street Saints wastes no time recruiting you, and as they say, membership has its privileges...

Anyone who's played GTA, Spiderman, or The Hulk—ever scrutinizing the sorry state of the low poly-count replicate drones that scurry about amidst frequent

bouts of both texture and environmental draw-in—has undoubtedly been eagerly anticipating the maturation of open-world gaming, hopeful that the impending generation of consoles would be their messiah. Having spent ample time with an early but suitably representative version of Volition's first foray into the urban jungle, Saint's Row, I can attest first-hand that for all intents and purposes, deliverance is at hand. The single Mac 10-toting fly hovering over the red-tinged ointment being that the genre is still a generation short of every last detail being attended to. If you're looking for seamless entry into every room of every building where real-world physics are applied to every moveable or breakable object, your game should be ready sometime early





Saints' reaches a new level of detail for open-world gaming.



next decade, otherwise, prepare to be sufficiently blown away in around 5 months.

Having played every open-world game since they crawled out of their pungent primordial ooze (can you say Cybermorph?), I can only describe the initial feeling of this generation's city-crawler as borderline euphoric, especially if you've been playing games for a decade or more. It's astonishing how dramatic an effect next-generation visuals can have on this particular style of game. Set dressing, such as normal-mapped, real-time characters that exude personality, once reserved for cinemas, architecture that is nearly photo-real, detailed car interiors, and dramatic lighting, deliver a far better sense of big city life than we're accustomed to, and the game never loads. About the only visual envelope that hasn't been pushed is the depiction of violence. Bodies don't bleed, scar or come apart (should you happen upon the odd car bomb). There's enough of gunplay, head cracking and vehicular mayhem for even the most die-hard urban adrenaline junkie, but the scene of the crime remains squeaky clean. That's one of the things I like so much about Saint's Row. Volition has managed to chart their own course through open-world gaming's turbulent seas by creating a massive canvas for each player to conduct their own private war. There are missions integral to the story that involve serious gunplay (although arcadey and very well executed—the control and aiming are excellent) but once the damage is done, how you go about your business is pretty much up to you, within the scope of the



game's range of activities. It's all about building respect; initially to clean up the gang-added "Row" and afterward to keep it that way by fanning out and hitting your rival gangs where they live. Whether you choose to pimp, traffic drugs, steal, race, is pretty much up to you. And should you go temporarily insane to the point your notoriety sends every cop, ho, and gang-banger in the vicinity bearing down on you, there's always a Forgive and Forget nearby—Volition's very own big-city confessional that washes your rep away without a trace.

For all that Saint's Row brings to the genre's barely set table, however, Volition has been so barraged with cloning allegations they've become almost immune. Comparisons to the world's favorite free-roaming carnage cow, Grand Theft Auto, are inevitable (if not complimentary depending on how

"Volition has managed to chart their own course through open-world gaming's turbulent seas..."

you see it). In my opinion Saint's Row is to GTA what Doom is to Quake or Call of Duty to Medal of Honor. Select inherent aspects of the genre aside—such as standing in illuminated spheres to trigger missions and its very own radio dial—what drew me to Saint's Row is how much it stands on its own. Designations such as a lead character (of your own Caucasian, Asian, African-American, or Latino design) who begins his adventure as part of the solution give Saint's Row a more personal feel, and although it's filled with language and themes that make me

wish the "M" on the case was twice the size and in neon-orange, I appreciate the choices and, especially, gameplay that the game affords. Whether you choose life on the DL or to live vicariously through a hardcore gang-banger, the gameplay and control in Saint's Row is the best I've experienced in an open-world environment. The acting's not too shabby either. Complimenting the adept writing, Saint's employs one of the best video game ensembles to date.

I observed a fair amount of warts along the way (as is expected when

Seamless, in game
cinemas never
looked so good.

you're previewing a game 3-plus months from completion) during my 3-or-so-hour hands-on time with Saint's, which I wasted no time using to unhinge a bunch of important and very busy people from their most ambitious game yet, and I think you'll find we left no stone unturned. An extra special thanks to Volition and THQ for putting up with me as I struggled to preview the first urban epic I've ever actually gotten excited about. When I can create a corpulent, tattooed, muscle-headed Asian guy dressed in racing leathers, a neon-green pimp coat and a beret, then load him into a convertible with flames down the sides and help clean up the hood... I guess I can forget about platformers for a few days.



Interview

Volition staff members

Adam Pletcher **Lead Technical Artist**
Chris Stockman **Lead Designer**
Jacques Hennequet **Producer**
Matt Flegel **Art Director**
Alan Lawrence **Technical Director**

Rockstar more or less created a genre when GTA went 3D. Since, there have been comic book iterations, but you're the first to really expand on the model, taking what that series established and adding your own devices. How difficult has it been to innovate on the core model and how many iterations have you been through since the beginning of development?

JH: I am not sure that we are trying to innovate on the core GTA model itself, but rather we are trying to take the next step in what we view as a genre of games that GTA started, which we call "open-world". Saint's Row is our first attempt at designing an open-world game. In our mind, the "urban criminal" theme is really a backdrop, not the core of the game. What we are after, long term, is learning how to design and produce less linear games that offer players additional freedom and take advantage of what our medium is best at: adapting to gamers and giving them options. Creating these types of games is a huge challenge in all areas: Design, AI, Art, even Testing become more complicated because of all the possibilities. Saint's Row went

through a number of iterations; mostly we had to drop some things that we would have liked to have in the game, such as drivable boats, motorcycles, gambling etc... because realistically we did not think we would have time to implement them. But we also revised a number of gameplay mechanics a number of times, as well as controls, cameras etc...

CS: It hasn't been hard at all. When we first set out to make a next-gen open-world game we looked at GTA long and hard and found several areas that we thought needed vast improvement. We also read all the reviews, internet forums, etc. and saw that most people thought the camera / targeting system needed much improvement, that the graphics were pretty sub-par compared to the average PS2 game, that people really wanted multiplayer, that most people just ran around and caused as much havoc as possible without really venturing out and completing the story.

This list was relatively easy to come up with and those were the key areas we wanted to focus on.

Did THQ come to you and order up an open-world epic-style game or did you pitch THQ?

CS: Volition pitched Saint's Row to THQ.

JH: We pitched it to THQ. Remember that, at the time, San Andreas was not even on anyone's radar and we had no idea what its theme would be. THQ had some concerns about the nature of the game, but quickly saw the potential and they have supported

"...we looked at GTA long and hard and found several areas that we thought needed vast improvement."

Chris Stockman, Lead Designer

us ever since.

A game like this seems like a massive undertaking, even on next-gen... Are you enjoying the process? I gather it will be much easier the second time around...

JH: I may be misquoting but I think it was Virginia Woolf who, when asked whether she enjoyed writing, answered: "I enjoy having written". I will enjoy "having produced" Saint's Row, assuming all goes reasonably well between now and our ship date. Making a game like Saint's Row is fascinating, very exciting but also fairly stressful and pretty tiring. I would not trade it for anything else, though. And I hope that I will have an opportunity to continue to explore open-world game development in the future. CS: It's been a huge learning experience for Volition. Making open-world games on current-gen platforms is a difficult process (just look at how many open-world games

exist today compared to other genres), now when you add in the detail level / visual fidelity people expect of a next-gen title and you compound that difficulty two-, three-, even four-fold.

What poses the biggest challenge from an art standpoint?

MF: Working on new hardware always poses interesting challenges. You're shooting at a moving target, really. Until you have that final kit, nothing is really a guarantee. This has led to all sorts of art challenges ranging from constant memory pool juggling to updating our streaming layout. While dealing with new hardware was a challenge, the biggest one was really creating next-gen artwork from the start. There's so much more going on with the art content - it's no longer a single polygon with a single texture. The proprietary shaders we use for everything (from a character to the street) really means artists are mapping up to and beyond 4 textures per poly. There were a lot of challenges in developing those tools and pipelines, but also to find the balance between content that can be created in a timely manner, while still hitting the very high visual bar we've set.

AP: The sheer volume of art assets. In terms of world size, ours isn't much bigger than those in the GTA games, but on the 360 the level of detail is just through the roof. Every square foot of the world has so much more to it. Authoring, maintaining and tracking all those details has been a monumental task.



JH: The combination of mushrooming quality expectations, amount of assets needed and average technical requirements placed on each artist is daunting. Creating the city of Stilwater required a huge amount of work. Balancing art and performance requirements is also challenging.

How do you go about writing a quality story that comes across as authentic urban hardcore rather than the board room variety served up in games like Ride or Die? And you're dealing with Asian, Caucasian, African-American, and Latino... Do you recruit gang members to get it just right?

CS: We actually hired multiple writing consultants throughout the dev cycle to review our script for authenticity. I will also say our writing guru Steve Jaros really helped shape the tone of the script. We're not a serious gang simulator but instead more of a tongue-in-cheek action experience. We don't take this stuff too seriously and I think in the end that's what separates us from the GTA series.

JH: We actually had three consultants in this area and one of them was an ex-gang member. But I would like to say that Saint's Row is not really striving for hardcore urban authenticity. We are not claiming to be a gang simulator at all. The reality of gang life would not be an enjoyable gameplay experience; people familiar with gangs or even gang members would be the first ones to tell you that. Our game is loosely based on urban crime and gangs, but with a lot of exaggeration and a good amount of tongue-in-cheek humor. Whether or not people like it, I can guarantee that it did not come from

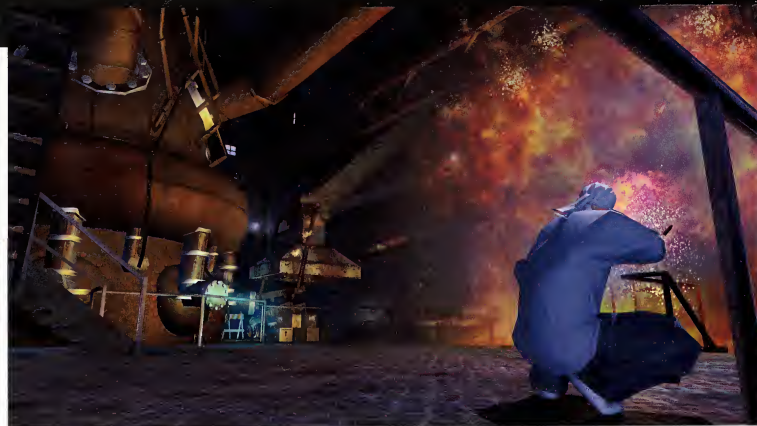
any board room.

I was thoroughly impressed. Among the differences in SR the wholesale mowing down of innocents comes at a price which I think is wise as it makes the game seem more realistic. On the other hand however, you've installed Forgive and Forget, a one-stop cleansing of one's notoriety to shake any ill-will. What led to this decision?

JH: Mostly gameplay balance. Your notoriety goes up pretty quickly. There are only three ways to lower it: Wait without doing anything wrong, go to Forgive and Forget and get a new piece of ID, or go to the plastic surgeon. If you could only wait, it would make for very frequent forced lulls, which would be frustrating for the player.

CS: This is more of a gameplay-ism than a representation of real life. We needed a way for players to lose notoriety when they want to. Sure there is a fee associated with it but as long as you have the cash you can get the gangs and police to stop harassing you. We actually toyed around with other alternatives like paying off police or laying low at your crib but none of these ideas really panned out. With F and F, all you need to do is drive in one way, press a button and drive out. It's very fast and keeps people in the game.

While the game does promote "respect" it still comes at the end of a gun in places. Players have a choice of activities such as drug trafficking, pimping, theft, or racing but the story is moved along (at least initially) by mostly killing rivals. Did you ever consider making killing optional



"...Saint's Row is not really striving for hardcore urban authenticity."

Jacques Hennequet, Producer

the whole way through or do you think that strays too far from the urban path? I imagined creating a speed demon and being the tuner car guy that takes everyone on via racing, based on the description I got at THQ. Is that an option outside of the core missions?

JH: The problem is not deviating from the urban path, the problem is developing gameplay mechanics that can carry throughout the game in multiple ways. What we did with Saint's Row is take the first step in this direction. You can favor the racing activity, but at its core, Saint's Row is about combat and at some point you will have to fight if you want to conquer the city. I would like to see games that give you the type of options you described fully developed in the future and I think they will come (actually, if given a chance I would like to develop them), but it is going to take a lot of work and therefore a bit of time. But I think open-world gaming will evolve in this direction.

On the next-gen front, the integrity of the

cars, architecture and normal-mapped lead and main characters is instantly recognizable (and awesome) as expected.

How do ancillary characters react?

JH: Characters will react differently in different situations and also based on the amount of respect you have earned. One thing I hope you should already be noticing is our Persona system. The citizens of the city, civilians, cops and gang members, have an enormous number of lines to choose from when walking around, so you should be seeing and hearing a city that feels much more varied and dynamic.

I take it water, shadows and darkness, and building textures have a ways to go....What can we expect?

JH: Water is a work in progress, so are building reflections. Good catches. The August date has to do with overall polish and gameplay balance, not just these issues. AP: Those are largely cosmetic issues that continue to be developed well into the polish phase on the project. The water shader, for instance, is still in-progress on a couple different fronts, and is shaping up to be amazing.

Will players be able to shatter glass or interact with the environments outside of the areas marked for opening or kicking in?

MF: If you're asking if we'll have Geo-Mods, the answer is no. Some glass will be breakable, but not every single pane of glass will be breakable. There's just way too much entailed with making that work for a



city as dense as ours. There are, however, tons of havoc objects throughout the world that the player will be able to kick, shoot, blow up, and run over.

CS: I don't think we'll be able to add support for general shattering of glass on exteriors. Those kind of effects, while nice, come at a memory hit and we're rapidly nearing our memory limit.

Will we be able to swim? Will there be an effect for running on the beach in shallow water?

AP: Yes and absolutely.

As much as you're pushing the violence envelope will you also push sexuality? Does our lead character get to spend any quality time with Jin?

JH: I really don't think we're pushing the violence envelope at all. There are a lot of games around that are more violent and/or gorier than we are. In terms of sexuality, there are a lot of references to it, a lot of innuendo, but nothing overt.

CS: We decided early on not to stray down the sexual path. While we do have some implied sexual situations we don't overtly show it.

Why do you suppose the media and opportunistic/ill-informed politicians are okay with wholesale murder but go completely off at the mere hint of sexuality? One is the bane of inner city life and the other one of life's greatest pleasures... Is this something you've wrestled with during the development of your story?

JH: Yes we have; this is something that has always baffled me. As an individual I think that sex is far less disturbing than violence, but I can't really say much more than that.

While we're on gender; why no option to create a female lead? I was really hoping for this on next-gen.

JH: We wanted to, but the implications in terms of asset creation were very large (whole new sets of animations, different bones system and rigging, etc...) and we had to back down. It is not as simple as just adding a "Male/Female" option on the Character Creation Menu. But the desire was there.



"We take full advantage of the three cores on the Xbox 360, so taking advantage of all seven SPEs on the PS3 will be critical."

Alan Lawrance, Technical Director



AP: That was an overall scope decision we made early on. Allowing a second base model for the PC would have multiplied the number of assets needed on several fronts, and considering the amount of technical risk we already had going, it felt like a bit too much.

The character creation is a great option otherwise (although the hair leaves much to be desired). I love that you can choose your race and really go nuts on body type. How much can you alter your character as the game forges ahead? Does he receive any scars? What about tattooing and any new hair styles aside from what's on the initial menu?

JH: Wait until you see the hair now. I think you will find it improved. Yes, you can get tattoos and you can change your hair style. No, you do not receive scars. We'll add that to the wish list.

Does a really heavy guy have any disadvantages compared to a skinny one?

JH: No. We pondered this for a long time and concluded that we did not want to encourage people to create exaggerated characters and then punish them for doing so; nor did we want to get into an RPG type of "stats" management. But it's something interesting to explore in the future if done properly, in my opinion.

I'm also hoping for some good jumping and perhaps some foot chases a la films of this nature. It would be so cool to have a rooftop chase. Open-world games traditionally lack gameplay outside of driving and shooting. Speaking of which, currently you can climb a six-foot fence but not jump over or negotiate a smaller rail or obstacle. Is that being addressed?

JH: There is a rooftop car chase in one of the missions. How's that? We have added a running jump that can be used as either a melee attack or a roll. The reason you could not climb that 4-ft. rail was probably because it had not received its climbing spline. I understand your desire for more freedom and believe me, I am in agreement with you, but understand that we add these freedoms in many different areas, so you cannot expect us to match or beat a "specialized" game in a particular one: our fighting will

not match "DOA", our driving will not match "Need for Speed", but it is the accumulation of these smaller freedoms in various areas that enhances the overall experience and makes our type of games unique.

MF: We have been working on our climbing system, to allow greater flexibility in what and how the player can climb. We also will support AI to follow the player, similar to what you describe above – imagine being chased by cops down an alley way, climbing over a fence, only to turn around and see the cops climb over the fence and keep coming!

I really like the fighting and driving. Sounds like the end results are going to be great.

The lead character is also non-reactive. Is there a way to make him react to simple yes or no situations? You know, give him some random emotion to get some canned feedback, like in Fable. The story and dialogue are so well done...

JH: We try to make him show minor reactions in cutscenes. This is fairly complicated because of the fact that you create your own character. Note, by the way, that the character you created appears in all the cutscenes as you designed it. In terms of giving him a voice, can you imagine how many voices we would have to record to match all the possible characters? If we only used one voice, what if it did not match the character you created at all, or what if you hated it? You're stuck with it for the whole game. I will tell you a small secret: the player does talk. He speaks once sentence per story, towards the end of each one. I am not sure he makes much sense, though.

Point taken. Can't wait to hear what I have to say! How'd you get Keith David involved? He does an amazing job as Julius. Any other notable actors in the cast?

JH: Plenty. We're very proud of all our cast: Michael Clarke Duncan, David Carradine, Clancy Brown, Joaquim de Almeida, just to name a few. Daniel Dae Kim's performance as Johnny Gatt is awesome. And we have some great female characters, too. But I don't want to spoil it for you.

CS: We asked and he accepted. Our cast was pretty much hand picked by us. We



came up with a list of actors we thought would fit the roles we created. I'm happy to say that most (if not all) of the actors we chose accepted.

It's a great cast. I can't wait to get deeper into the story. I was only able to jack cars and noticed that there were no parked cars anywhere. Will motorcycles and other vehicles factor in...any scooters or boats? If so what can we look forward to as the game progresses?

JH: There will be parked cars. There are boats, but they are not drivable (I wish we could have done this). Big trucks, blinged or riced cars.

CS: We're in the process of laying down parked cars throughout the city. For SR1 we decided not to support boats or motorcycles. We tried to focus on the core mechanics of an open-world game instead of trying to match feature-for-feature with GTA. If there is an SR2 we hope to add these additional elements to the gameplay.

If? Yeah right. I love Freckle Bitches, commercials and all (almost as much as the term "riced" cars). Why can't I go in, order a Fun Bag and enjoy the ambience?

JH: Because it would take us another two years to make that game.

CS: We decided early on that we wouldn't offer the ability to buy food. Maybe for SR2.

In the clothing store, Sloppy Seconds, clothes racks, including the hanging garments, are solid fixtures. Before you get too angry at me for harping on the realism front again, would you say that this genre is still in need of yet another generation to become truly interactive? Are we at the point where you can make a prettier GTA-style game and that's pretty much the extent of it?

JH: You don't make me angry at all. I want all of this as much as you do. I do resent the "prettier GTA" comment a bit, just because I think it overlooks a number of gameplay elements but hey, it's your opinion. There are no load times in our game, period, indoors or outdoors. That's a pretty big step, right there. Of course it is a time and a manpower issue, as well as a technology issue. Realize that we are making our first open-world

Head for the nearest "Forgive and Forget", because the Heat won't.

game on a new platform that is changing while we are developing the game itself. So we are trying to catch up with 4 generations of GTA games in one cycle, and we are doing this on a new platform. It does not get much harder than this.

And yes, it will take at least another generation of hardware before we can really tap into full world interactivity. But by that time the sound barrier will have become something else, most likely development cost. You have to understand that doing this is pretty complicated. You don't just press a magic "make interactive" button. It takes an enormous amount of work to do what you describe. But we'll get there. We have to. That's what the medium is for.

Prettier GTA is a compliment...Anyway—I said "GTA-style." Saint's Row is a gorgeous game and it goes without saying the gameplay runs deeper. I'm just poking around in the dark here... Next-gen is all so new. What about loading between areas of the city or cheating on the panoramas? Would that give you more freedom?

CS: I would say the biggest bottleneck right now is memory limitations. We stream all interiors and the city entirely off disc. Once you load up the game you'll never see another loading screen again. However, we are limited by the amount of RAM we have to work with. The things you mention, while they would be extremely nice, are RAM intensive and when we need to get characters, vehicles, high-res textures, building geometry etc., there just isn't much room for anything else.

How difficult was it to cultivate your radio stations? Rockstar certainly set that bar high. Have you added anything to the mix?

CS: I think we're gonna set that bar higher. It's one of the key components of the game we wanted to improve upon. We offer over 150+ licensed tracks throughout our 10 music radio stations (2 more are reserved for talk radio), each song has a DJ intro and outro, we also have callers that will request

"Once you load up the game, you'll never see another loading screen again."

Chris Stockman, Lead Designer

specific songs, and don't forget our commercials that actually affect the game. Oh and we also have newscasts that will chime in after key events in the game.

Sounds amazing. What I've heard so far is hilarious and the music selection is amazing; thanks for the metal. You'll obviously be porting the game over to PS3. Will the dual processing and cell processor technology allow you to do more or is it too early to tell?

Alan Lawrance Technical Director: It is too early to tell, but on paper the PS3 is comparable in power to the Xbox360. A lot will depend on how easy or difficult it is to get the full power out of the processors on the

PS3. We take full advantage of the three cores on the Xbox360, so taking advantage of all seven SPEs on the PS3 will be critical. JH: It will be a very different beast than the 360, with its own strengths and weaknesses

I've only played up to the end of act one—basically cleaning up the Row and then jacking the semi (which I thought was awesome—hope there's more like it). Besides Forgive and Forget, character creation, the ability to buy a wide range of normal-mapped clothes, and the obvious visual upgrades, what other strides in the genre lay in store as the game unfolds? Does the game stray from the path even further?

JH: I think so. What you did not get from this, because it only opens up at the end of the prologue, is all the activities. They become available to you and you choose which ones you want to perform. They, in turn, earn you respect and money. Respect unlocks story missions, which earn you territory. So you have a good deal of choice in what you do most of in the game.

I got a small sample of that at THQ and it's what really excited me about Saint's Row aside from the inroads you've made, the seamlessness of the story and action, and, of course, the amazing visuals. August is etched in stone right?

JH: Bet on it. **play**



System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	THQ
Developer	Climax	Available	June





MOTO GP 2006

Born from jets

words Dave Halverson

A symphony of speed and precision—with a rocket strapped between the pilot's legs—Moto GP racing is among the most specialized and intricate sports on the planet. Carving a smooth, perfectly premeditated path at speeds in excess of 180 miles-per-hour is a feat reserved for the few, the proud...the borderline insane—unless you happen to be one of the growing sect that spend a fair amount of their expendable time clutching a wireless control pad. Gaming's biggest allure has always been the ability to do and experience things we otherwise could only dream of—a dream that becomes more lucid with each passing generation of game console.

With the dawn of the Xbox 360 upon us, Climax is firing the first two-wheeled shot for this pivotal era, assembling a 360-ized version of its Moto GP archetype in record time; completing development in under a year from start to finish. As the purveyors of all things Moto GP on the Microsoft side of the fence (the game's originators at Namco maintain its lineage on PlayStation) the goal seems to be to deliver as realistic a racing experience as possible, while expanding on the game's core premise (authentic GP Racing) by adding Extreme (wider and faster) courses

winding through the streets of the GP series' host cities. Can you say worth the price of admission?

Initially the clear distinction between generations is a close encounter of the visual kind: The new rendering engine sires dynamic range lighting, light scattering, dynamic self-shadowing and draws to the horizon—the art assets are also

completely new—and many of the tracks are virtually complete rebuilds. The game uses a grass shader that draws individual blades and scatters them across grassy areas, and runs with 4-times anti-aliasing, zipping along at a seemingly effortless 60 fps clip with 20 bikes on the track...20 45,000-poly count normal-mapped bikes with up to 6 layers of shader on every material. That's 6 times Moto GP3.

Further ramming realism into our HD space, the use of satellite imagery to map the courses, combined with the ability to

model much more of the distance, means anywhere you are on the track in the game, you get exactly the same view as you would if you were on the real track. There's even a science to the road itself. Climax has six layers of shaders on most of the tracks: Three base layers to create variety in the tarmac, then distress (like cracks and dirt) and then two layers for the racing line and another for braking, skids, and general laid rubber. In other, much fewer words, Moto GP looks freaking fantastic. I find all this new technobabble fascinating even though the end result is always the same: drool.

The ironic thing is that in the wake of this all-you-can-see smorgasbord (and the same applies for the game's audio by the way) Moto GP 2006 was still missing some of the realism I was hoping this generation would introduce. As I played through a pre-Beta version of the game, marveling at the handling physics and select pockets of polish, I couldn't help but wonder why Climax was stopping short on a few key elements that would really drive the true experience home; so to the UK we go for a brief Q&A with Producer Jason Avent...

Q&A ▶▶

Race fans: We have officially arrived.



"Initially the clear distinction between generations is a close encounter of the visual kind..."



Q&A

Moto GP 2006 Producer Jason Avent

I noticed a man in the crowd waving on different occasions. Will the final spectators have animation or is this a test of some kind?

Yes, the spectators are animated, and respond to riders as they go past. If you're doing well in the race, they get more excited and start waving, jumping, and cheering as you go past.



Thumbs up!

Will there be races that integrate pitting in? Will there be a crew?

We simulate most aspects of the sport very accurately, but we decided early on that introducing tire wear and other 'degradation' aspects would make the game a bit too complex, and would take the focus off racing. The skill of MotoGP is about committing to turns, choosing braking points, etc., and having to worry about tire wear as well was decided to be a bit too much. Also, most races are three laps long, so fitting a pit visit into that wouldn't make much sense.



Thumbs down!

What about the mechanics flashing the chalk boards as the riders go by? Not in this game.



Thumbs down!

Will the dirt at trackside have an effect? Currently there doesn't appear to be any tire tracks or dust.

Yeah, that's in the pipeline. In the finished game, you'll kick up dirt and bits of grass, and gouge a tire track through grass and gravel.



Thumbs up!

Is anything normal-mapped besides bike and rider?

Actually a lot of the environment is normal-mapped, such as the pit lane buildings, official cars, ad boards, etc. Pretty much anywhere that would be improved by having it, has it. You have to be careful not to overuse fashionable stuff like normal-mapping - there are some games where everything has it, and it's just not appropriate a lot of the time.



Thumbs up!

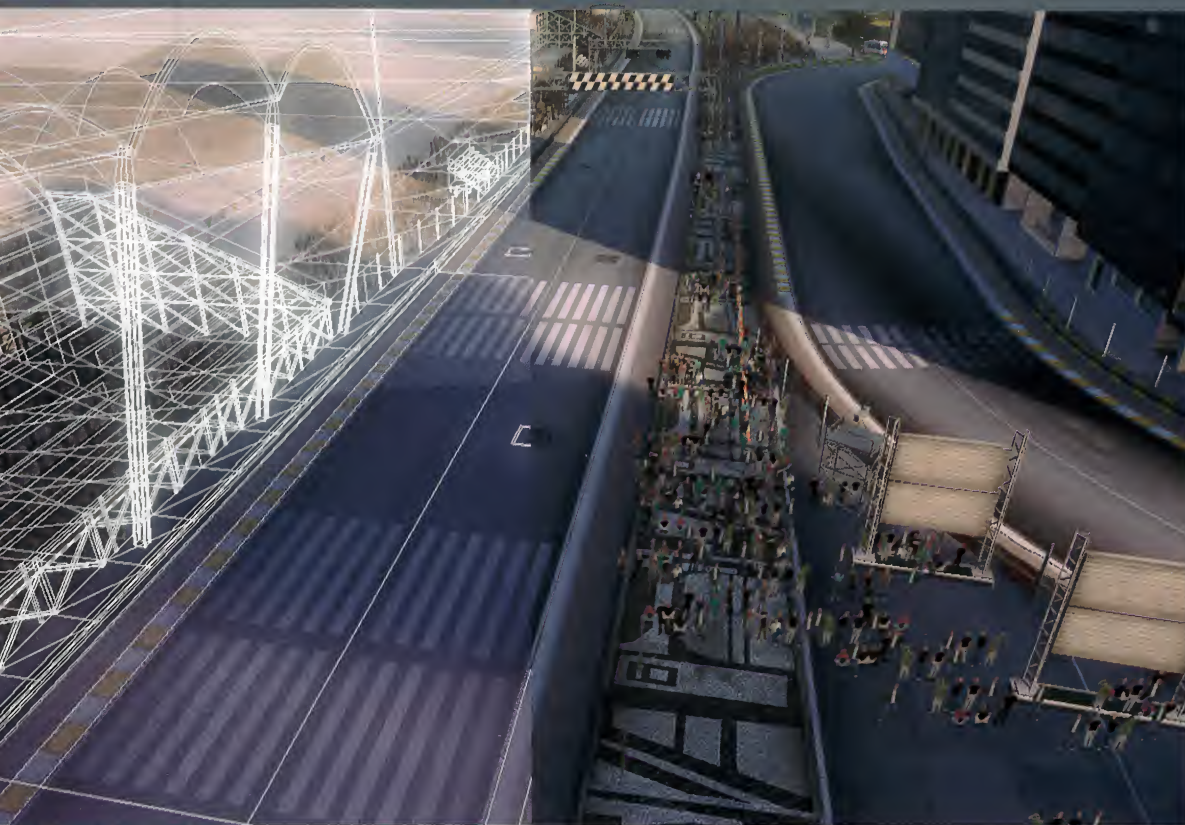
Will the factory trucks in the infield have reflection maps or team colors? Currently they look placeholder.

Yeah, the factory trucks and hospitality tents are all correctly colored, and have specular maps. You're really keen on shader effects, I can tell. Don't worry, it's all there. We've put a lot of effort into materials: all our bikes have realistic materials such as painted carbon fiber, bare carbon fiber, brushed aluminum and rubber. Just like the real thing, the materials reflect or absorb light as you'd expect in real life. Rubber looks matte, paint looks shiny and the light shines off of both the resin and the weave of the carbon fiber. The detail is amazing.



Thumbs up!

I suppose I can live without a pit crew, marathon GPs, and a mechanic until next time so long as I'm getting a buoyant crowd and crazy detail on literally every other level. Two well-worn, enthusiastic thumbs way up. play





"We've put a lot of effort into materials: all our bikes have realistic materials such as painted carbon fiber, bare carbon fiber, brushed aluminum and rubber..."

Moto GP 2006 Producer Jason Avent



System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	THQ	Available	Now
Developer	Relic	Online/Multi	1-8	ESRB Rating	M





The Outfit

Guns don't kill people. The Outfit kills people.

words Greg Orlando



If it's not blown
up, you can
drive it.

t's springtime everywhere but in German dictator Adolf Hitler's heart. The hard-fighting, nail-chewing, Ratzki-killing, three-man conglomerate The Outfit has landed in occupied France, and this means but one thing: bad news for the Krauts.

These are men of iron and blood, fighting an almost solitary war against the fascists. They are, as their hard-nosed, machine gun-firin' Sgt. Tommy Mac quips throughout the entirety of the game, "men who won't break down." Each, with his lantern jaw and chiseled features, appears to be rendered in some vague homage to 3DO's Army Men. As individuals, they carry unique weapons; possess their own strengths and weaknesses in terms of speed, health, purchasing power, and stamina; and can issue different squad commands to their underlings.

They're in the business of killing and, well, business is booming.

The Outfit is set during World War II, but the game doesn't slavishly adhere to history. In fact, it fairly well stomps all over it, suggesting The Outfit's massive campaign took place before the Allies conducted the D-Day invasion. In terms of weaponry, Outfit also takes certain liberties, assuming, for example, WWII flamethrowers didn't routinely explode and horribly burn their users when bullets struck their fuel tanks.

Free of the burden of accuracy, Outfit embraces an exaggerated play style, and it works well. With its destruction on

demand mechanic, men and materiel can be air-dropped from the heavens, providing for almost instantaneous reinforcement. Players are rewarded with FUs—the game whimsically notes these are "field units"—for destroying buildings, seizing territories, meeting goals, and killing Germans, which can then be used to requisition new items. The simple formula of more destruction equals more opportunity to drop in more stuff serves to carry Outfit from start-to-finish.

Destruction on demand wins the day for The Outfit. A simple press of the Xbox 360 controller's "Y" button calls up a menu wheel from which players can select the item or attack they need, and the process can be managed quickly even in the midst of a firefight. In this manner, it's possible to call up reinforcements for the four grunts who perpetually follow the player's selected Outfit squad member, select air- and artillery strikes on fortifications, drop in machine gun nests or anti-tank batteries, or call in for a vehicle such as a tank, car, or halftrack. Capturing military targets such as armories, motor pools, and radio towers allows for the ability to access more (and more destructive) items and whichever side holds these has a definite strategic advantage.

It's easy to see how this feature



**"The Outfit
has landed in
occupied France,
and this means
but one thing:
bad news for the
Krauts."**

changes the face of The Outfit. It effectively turns the game from a by-the-numbers third-person perspective adventure into an ultra-destructive kiddy playground where players can shape their strategies, manufacture their own tactics, and experiment to see what works best. The addition of tactics and planning reshape the landscape almost entirely, and while the game goes whole-hog on the action, it does so while fully encouraging smart play and creative use of the game's tools.

Storming a strongly held Nazi position becomes an exercise in what if. What if machine guns are dropped in to even up the odds—will they keep the enemy



soldiers distracted enough for The Outfit to flank the position and seize it from the side or rear? Would a newly summoned tank be able to roll past the defenses or will anti-tank guns and footsoldiers' bazooka rockets make short work of any approaching armored vehicle. Does the enemy have appropriate air defenses to negate a bombing raid on its territory?

The Outfit never fails to provide for these what-if moments. Each level contains respawn checkpoints as well as an armory, radio tower, and motor pool to be captured and, presumably, held against counterattack. Initially, the game allows players to steamroll the enemy with brute force, and assumes the Nazis aren't aggressive about retaking lost property. As things progress, however, the enemy's defenses become more intricate and his willingness to both reinforce and go on the offensive increases. Soon, players are forced to not only plan offensive strategies, but also deal with the possibility that, say, a squad of SS Troopers and a Panzer will be stopping by to reclaim a piece of land they coughed up minutes ago.

With the possibility of counterattacks, the game takes on an added depth. Sometimes, the Germans will lightly hold a target and fiercely attempt to retake it, or hold ground to the last man and then half-heartedly try to snatch it back. Placing defenses to work in the player's absence is always a smart idea, but doing so uses up a lot of FUs. Finding a balance, then,

Hans The Kraut

THQ's third-person adventure The Outfit fires its first salvo at political correctness. The World War II-based game liberally refers to Germans as "Krauts," and does not balk at the suggestion that France, under the Nazi-run Vichy regime, had its share of collaborators. The game leans in favor of a fantastical representation of the war between the Allies and Axis powers, to be sure, but does not excessively sugarcoat it.

between offense and defense becomes a critical part of play.

This, of course, does not hint at how fun *The Outfit* is to play. There's always something to do, someone to kill, a position to storm, and a medal to win. Battles are fierce and noisy, and there's always a sense of accomplishment at having knocked out a tank, bushwhacked Nazi reinforcements, sniped some jerk operating a machine gun battery. In addition to a level's primary mission—normally an end point that must be held—the developers have wisely included side missions emphasizing an aspect of play that might not commonly see use otherwise. One mission has players operating an anti-aircraft gun while German Stuka bombers attempt to paste Allied guns. Another requires that a Nazi convoy be destroyed from long distance, with players needing to drop in anti-tank guns along a riverbank. Although a few of these missions are dull in that they demand that [insert number] of [insert object] be found and destroyed, most are straightforward, brief, and punctuated by lots of player-friendly explosions.

In a series of small, yet important moments, *The Outfit* gets fleshed out in the manner of a Hollywood blockbuster. An enormous armored train can be stolen and used to crush tanks in its path. A German general delightfully muses that his troops are indeed fine, "and they hate the Dutch." The game's plot twists serpentine, with the developers not only dealing with the notion that all is not as it seems in a clever fashion, but also altering the Outfit's membership. The Outfit may appear to be all brawn and muscle, gunpower and dead bodies, but it has a heart, too, and a brain.

The Outfit only stumbles when it gets lazy; most of the levels are aligned in a linear fashion, which puts a damper on a player's ability to navigate around enemy

"There's always something to do, someone to kill, a position to storm, and a medal to win."



Locked, loaded
and enjoying the
view.

positions in order to find strategic flanking points. The game loses steam when it locks players into tight, narrow corridors, something it tends to do more often than not. There's not much fun to be had when players are confined and they have to somehow deal with two marauding enemy tanks. When this happens, they can either expend lots of FUs building anti-tank guns to deal with the threat (placing them, perhaps in an area where they might never see use again), drop in a tank to slug it out with the opposition, or die many times over trying to take the enemy with just five men. Multiplayer maps highlight the game's ability to provide wide-open fields with multiple approach points for targets. It's sad, then, when the single-player adventure seems to hem in players with tiny hills or water that spells death for the fragile soldier that touches it.

The ending, too, reeks of someone's plan to finish development before lunchtime. After these men of action slog through hard-fought 12 levels, the game abruptly ends with a whimper—the game's primary antagonist is defeated, without fanfare, in a cut-scene.

Online action provides the game's best thrills, with up to eight players slogging it out at one time. Here, it's simply chaos as teams (Nazi and Allies) race to seize and hold strongpoints and objectives, drop in junk in great carload lots, and attempt to plot some type of strategy. Outfit allows vehicles to be carjacked, enemy transmissions (sent via the Xbox 360's Communicator headset) to be intercepted, and foes to be crushed by stuff dropped in by airlift. The free-form play works exceedingly well, and there's a lot of room for creativity within the open environments.

This Outfit suits the Xbox 360. Pardon the horrible pun. **play**

The Outfit

score **8.0**

- + Destruction on demand; great online play.
- Anticlimactic ending potholes a fun adventure; uninspired level design leans heavily on linear stages.



For The Sequel...

It's never too early to start thinking sequel, and Play recommends *The Outfit 2* continue the storyline. This time, however, would it kill the developers to throw in the two things every great World War II game must have: Hitlerbots (and plenty of them) and a minigame where you, as an Outfit member, get to punch German dictator Adolf Hitler in the stomach?



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HITMAN

Blood Money

Dirty deeds done dirt cheap...

words Greg Orlando

If money can't buy happiness, some solace can be taken in the fact that it can be used to hire the services of a really good hitman, such as the enigmatic Agent 47.

Forty-seven has a barcode on the back of his head and, now, a target on his back. His new 13-mission adventure Hitman: Blood Money sees the hitman traveling across America, whacking targets, and trying to resolve a war between rival assassination agencies. Once again, IO Interactive has cooked up a creepy, amoral adventure filled with albino assassins, drunk clowns who fall miserably at making balloon animals, and lots of places to ditch the bodies.

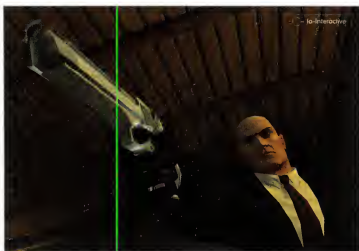
As the war progresses, 47's notoriety will be tracked. If he accomplishes his missions quietly without killing non-essential targets or leaving a lot of witnesses to his crimes, it will be easier for him to sneak through levels unnoticed. The more obtrusive he is, the more people are bound to take notices—and the notoriety

will carry over from mission to mission. Each of the game's missions is concluded with a newspaper front page that serves as an indication of how stealthy 47 was.

If the post-game wrap-up spells bad news for 47, he can spend his earnings on lowering his notoriety by bribing witnesses and such. That is, of course, if his expenses (cleaning up after violent missions doesn't come cheap) don't eat up all the profits. Earned monies can also be used to upgrade 47's five primary weapons in various ways to increase their damage, augment their ammunition capacity, alter their stability and precision, or lower the amount of sound they produce.

This is a newer, more flexible 47. Additional moves allow him to gain access to places he might have been previously unable to reach; he can scale certain walls, slide along ledges, climb up drainpipes, and hop from balcony to balcony. Suckers can also be pushed down stairs and tossed over ledges, with all the gory details being shown in a separate box at the top-right hand side of the game screen.

Missions take place in varied locales such as Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Mississippi, and Louisiana, and certainly emphasize creative play. There are plenty of ways to kill a human being, and Blood Money encourages players to find all of them. It's certainly revelatory—and in no way indicative of the state of his appetite—that most of Money's promotional material features 47 holding a toaster. **play**



System(s)	PC, Xbox, PlayStation 2	Publisher	Eidos
Developer	IO Interactive	Available	May



"Forty-seven has a barcode on the back of his head and, now, a target on his back."



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words Brady Fiechter

Lost Planet can be a bit deceiving on initial description alone. It's not a mech combat game in the traditional sense, but it does contain giant robots wreaking havoc on the land. It's not a combo-intensive, typical third-person action experience in the mold of a Devil May Cry or Onimusha, despite its creative team derived from both these accomplished series. Aiming for a first-person shooter feel, producer Keiji Inafune explains that the game is being created with the Western audience firmly in mind, and yet Lost Planet certainly looks, at first glance, gracefully Japanese in many regards.

So what exactly is Lost Planet?



Pick 'em apart, one limb at a time.



Let's call it action sci-fi adventure, a game influenced by several genres and filmic sensibilities. Mechs serve as the centerpiece to the game's world. They're called VS, or Vital Suits, and they can be commanded at your discretion. If the situation calls for traversing on foot, simply exit your vehicle and take off for the chase, jumping into the next available unit whenever you need the extra firepower or navigational help; you can even latch onto an enemy VS, tossing in a bomb to dispose of the pilot and commandeer his mech. Unlike the typically lumbering units you're used to controlling in most games, these mechanical war machines are fast and nimble, coming in various shapes and sizes, some open cockpit, some more menacing and secure.

Outside the protective confines of the VS, conditions are brutal. The planet you're on is a frozen wasteland, but the blowing snow and ice are the least of your concerns: creatures of various forms terrorize the land, living in underground caverns and mountainous regions, popping up out of the ground just in time to rip you apart. It's not revealed whether

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Capcom
Developer	Capcom	Available	2007



"Lost Planet can be a bit deceiving on initial description alone."

these indigenous Akrid are hostile or simply fighting for survival, forced to ward off the pirates who kill for the Akrid's life-giving thermal energy. As a survivor of an attack yourself, you play Wayne, an amnesiac searching for the answers to the death of his father and, ultimately, a much larger conspiracy against the whole of life in the Lost Planet. **play**



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Tomb Raider Legend

Welcome back, Lara...

words **Brady Fiechter**

Gamers have righteously specific tastes, and few popular series reflect that finicky discrimination as much as Tomb Raider. I don't often hear someone scoffing how much they hate Zelda or Mario or Castlevania, but Tomb Raider and its beloved status among many carries more than its share of detractors. Probably the biggest turnoff for most: a heroine who's always moved through her world with the grace of a rusty robot. That rigid, grid-based foundation has consistently kept leaping Lara in a state of deliberate, protracted control, the by-product of a compelling 3D world that's refused to break the stringent rules of 2D.

In the excitingly progressive Tomb Raider: Legend, change is afoot. Crystal Dynamics has replaced Eidos as perennial TR developer, and the foundational shift the series has been yearning for has finally been put into place. Lara feels immediately different, nimble and acrobatic and dynamic, yet her soul remains as strong as its birth in the original Tomb Raider. Her ability to more

directly and naturally interact with ledges and objects is one thing. The ease and intuitiveness of the added complexities is what really impresses.

There is an awareness and life to Lara. When she prepares for a jump or strains to position herself for the next move to safety, her body pitches in a

System(s)	PS2, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, PC	Publisher	Eidos
Developer	Crystal Dynamics	Available	April



"There is an awareness and life to Lara."

way that alerts you to the next logical course of action. It doesn't disarm the sense of adventure and peril, but merely strengthens the connective cord between your personal decision making and the organic response of the character. Lara is elegant and not overly spectacular, maintaining a more human quality in the

midst of the world's attention to rousing fantasy.

Lara's loaded with a number of nifty gadgets, including a flashlight and hi-tech binoculars that analyzes objects from various angles. A magnetic grappling hook can reel in the hapless victim in need of a toss off a cliff or up-close-and-

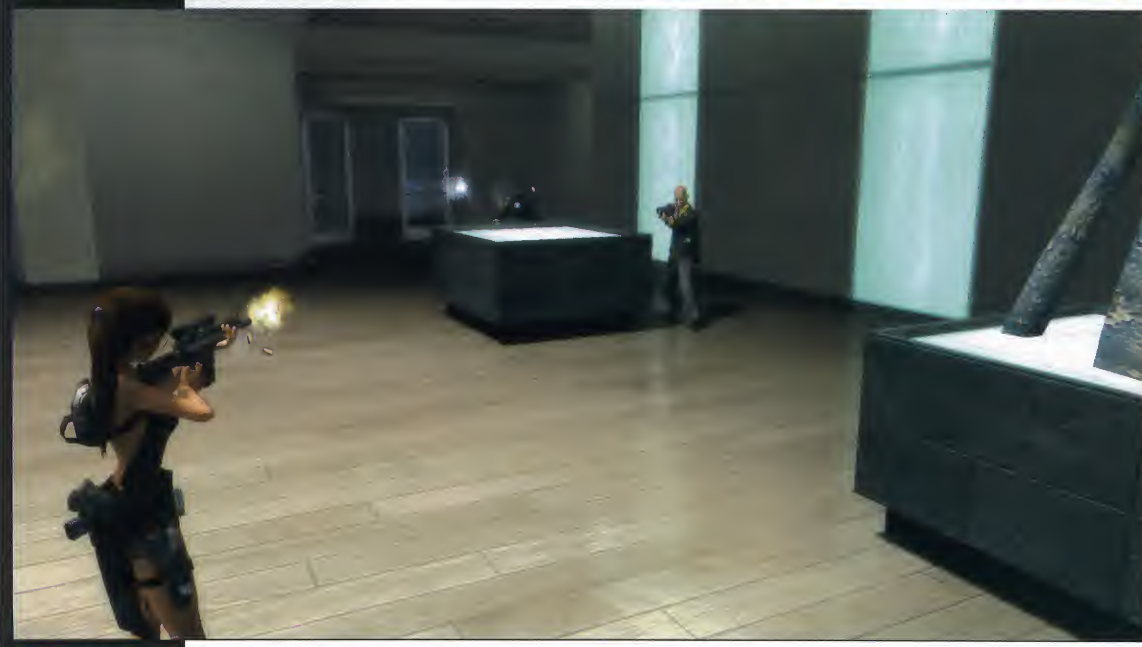
It wouldn't be
Tomb Raider
without it...



"There's a high-energy to the game that's fresh and new, built into the fabric of exploration and discovery."

personal confrontation; it can also be shot into anything that holds a grip for a swing or climb to the next progression point. Objects can be displaced to solve puzzles and cause problems for the opposition. The game is big on contextual clues; at certain times, hit points in the area will be displayed, prompting you to, say, explode a gas tank or rip free a loose piece of wall to crush anyone in its path. Scenarios also pop up where you're prompted to react with button-presses to avoid situational dangers like falling bridges and spinning contraptions of death. For a Tomb Raider experience, there's a lot to be aware of and directly respond to.

Whether the right choice or the



obligatory choice, combat's been given big billing for the show. Lara can carry her stock pistol and whatever weapon's been pilfered from a dying body, using her firearm of choice by locking on to the enemy with a rotational targeting system. Once you're locked in, you can dive and roll and find cover, flicking the target to your enemy of choice for a clean hit.

I'd have no problem playing a Tomb Raider devoid of any weapons play, open to a game of mystery and isolated adventure. That's not Tomb Raider: Legend, which has chosen to combine several elements for its broader purpose, but thankfully the spirit of what has made this series so appealing to its fans is back in place. There's a high-energy to the game that's fresh and new, built into the fabric of exploration and discovery. Whatever the complete game's success turns out to be, Tomb Raider: Legend will be compared to the original game in the series, and given the improvements for the modern palette, that spells huge possibilities. **play**



K

ingdom Hearts II is almost here, folks, and boy howdy has it been worth the wait. If you're like me, and thought the original Kingdom Hearts really couldn't get any better, you're going to be pleasantly surprised. Based on prerelease screenshots and trailers, I had the feeling that KHII would simply be more of the same...and I would have been happy with that. The original Kingdom Hearts was one of the most magical gaming experiences I've ever had. After actually

words Nick Des Barres



KHII features arguably the best representation of 2-D characters in a 3-D world ever seen.

System(s)	PS2	Publisher	Square Enix
Developer	Square Enix	Available	May



getting my hands on KHII, however, I am proud to report: It's all that and more, baby.

Kingdom Hearts II's story has been kept under close wraps, and for good reason. Far more mature than the original, and featuring staggering twists and turns (one coming within minutes of starting a new game), I shan't ruin it here. I will, however, suggest most strongly that those who haven't played Chain of Memories on GameBoy Advance do so now while there's still a bit of time. Though there are story recaps, the plot of CoM -- in which central characters like Naminé, DiZ and the mysterious Organization XIII were introduced -- is absolutely integral to full enjoyment of KHII's storyline.

We may not be able to talk about the story just yet, but I'll be more than happy to tell you about the new gameplay features. While the original Kingdom Hearts's battle system was cracking good fun, many criticized its simplicity, at-times frustrating camera angles, and wonky AI. First and most fundamental is a complete revamp of the camera system,





which is now fully adjustable with the right stick, allowing you to look up and down as well as right and left. The battle system has also been radically expanded, with a number of new features added and existing ones massively overhauled. The most obvious new feature is the addition of the Drive Gauge, which is used to merge (!) with party characters to temporarily gain extra abilities. For instance, merging with Goofy allows Sora to dual-wield keyblades, and Donald's Drive form grants you the ability to hover and boosts magical power. A further function of the new gauge is summons;

no longer requiring MP, you'll find yourself making much more frequent use of them. New team-up attacks make their debut, allowing Sora and a friend to tag-team foes. Finally, a context-sensitive, all-purpose "Reaction Command" button has been added, which allows you to perform a myriad of different actions, depending on where Sora is and what's around him. Think Resident Evil 4 or God of War. AI is also a lot smarter this time around -- your computer-controlled party characters don't waste nearly as many items as they did in the past. And did someone say something about playing as...the Mouse?



Do you three know anything about Scar's ghost?

Perhaps so, but you didn't hear it from me.

Most players' biggest complaints about the original Kingdom Hearts revolved around the Gummi Ship stages used to travel between worlds. Yes, they're still here, but this time they're pretty darn fun. No kidding. Rather than a tacked-on afterthought, these shooting sequences now feel like a fully fleshed-out game, heavily inspired by 3-D rail shooters like the Panzer Dragoon series. Gummi Ship customization may still be a bit humdrum, but at least it's been married to an appealing experience. This time around, you'll actually find yourself *looking forward* to inter-world travel.

While we're on the topic of worlds, I would be remiss not mention the bevy of new locales Sora and pals can travel to. In addition to most of the areas from the first game (though the maps are completely redesigned), you will now venture into worlds based on *The Lion King*, *Mulan*, *Steamboat Willie* (!), *Pirates of the Caribbean* (!!), and *Tron* (!!!). I'll save my impressions for the review, but suffice to say they all look spectacular. In particular, the nearly photorealistic denizens of Port Royal are jaw-droppingly lifelike; I don't think it would be too much of a stretch to say the Kingdom Hearts team is operating at the absolute bleeding edge of 3-D character animation. This, of course, applies to traditional Disney characters as well -- at times, you forget you're watching polygons. Square's 3-D emulation of hand-drawn 2-D expression is just that great.

Kingdom Hearts II Voice Cast

Has any video game ever had such an extravagant voice cast? Though far from complete, the list of luminaries below should give you some idea of how seriously Disney and Square take Kingdom Hearts. The vast majority of characters hailing from Disney theatrical films retain their original voice actors, and, well, the main villain is Christopher Lee. *Christopher Lee*, people!

Sora: Haley Joel Osment
Donald Duck: Tony Anselmo
Goofy: Bill Farmer
Mickey Mouse: Wayne Allwine
Riku: David Gallagher
Kairi: Hayden Panettier
Roxas: Jesse McCartney
Naminé: Brittany Snow
DiZ: Christopher Lee
Cloud: Steve Burton
Tifa: Rachael Lee Cook
Aerith: Mena Suvari
Mulan: Ming-Na
Hercules: Sean Astin
Tron: Bruce Boxleitner
Chicken Little: Zach Braff
Hades: James Woods
Shan Yu: Miguel Ferrer

All other areas of presentation are at a similar, world-class level -- areas are gorgeous and expansive, battles crammed with breathtaking pyrotechnics, score by Yoko Shimomura stellar, voice acting the best you've ever heard in a video game. I'm itching to tell you more, but we'll have to save that for next month's review. I think it's already safe to say this, however: Kingdom Hearts II is shaping up to be an instant classic.



RIGHT
By fusing with Donald, Goofy, or both, Sora gains stupendous new abilities.



System(s) Xbox 360
Developer Capcom

Publisher Capcom
Online/Multi TBA

Available May
ESRB Rating TBA

Dead Rising

Zombie cornucopia

words Brady Fiechter

There's something going down at the local mall. Something... unusual.

Reports of humans devouring other humans have come in through the news wire. As a budding, modern journalist in search of fame and fortune and, as long as you're attractive, the coveted contract with cable news, how could you possibly pass up this juicy opportunity to rule the airwaves with the scoop of a lifetime?

Arriving on the scene, you've got 72 (game) hours to exhaustively explore the scene before the helicopter returns for the pickup. Linger too long and you're dead. Actually, you're probably screwed regardless, given that the trashed mall is already overrun by thousands of zombies, but this is a video game with multiple solutions, so you know the drill: kill, kill, kill and maybe you'll survive.

If you're a benevolent soul, the idea is to aid other journalists and healthy shoppers as you bid for your own escape. There's a push to gather information throughout the rush for the helicopter, so certain situations may bring out your more ruthless nature as you leave screaming victims behind. I love this setup!

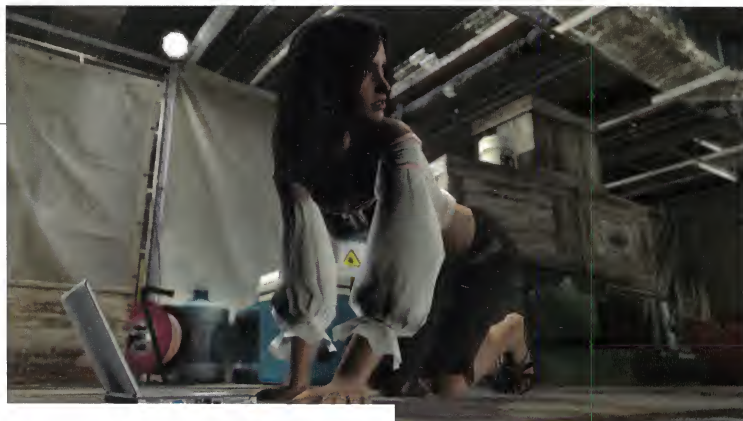
Around 100 people can be located and rescued, some desperately hiding in locked shops, some doing all they can to join in the killing, others hysterically confused as they make matters worse.

One rescue may lead to your personal safety, another may complicate the situation and come back to bite you in the ass. Bosses don't exist in the game; it's simply a rush to the exit, with prestige-point awards reflecting the success of your efforts. Your character levels up accordingly, improving stuff like strength, speed, agility, weapon cache and move sets.

Once the zombie bashing begins, you'll find that few places on Earth are more accommodating than a mall when it comes to surviving a mini apocalypse. Light sabers from a toy store, chairs from the food court, chainsaws from hardware, shotguns from the gun store, melons from the grocery, lawnmowers from home and gardening—it's all available for protection. Best weapon I've seen: exploding propane tank shredding dozens of zombies at once.



"Reports of humans devouring other humans have come in through the newswire."



By the numbers

Stores in the mall: 120
Specially designed mall furnishings and merchandise: Over 2000
Zombie types: 100
Usable Items: 250
Consumable Items: 50
Vehicles: 10
New moves from level up: 20
Combinations of apparel: 50,000



A special friend
High-powered
sniper rifles help
with the stressed
shopping.



Rampage Total Destruction

Eatin' good on the neighborhood

System(s)	PS2, GameCube	Developer	Pipeworks
Publisher	Midway Home Ent. Inc.	Available	Spring

While the bulk of the console development community slaves away over mega-hour (and budget) epics that suck the life out of glossy-eyed game-makers from sea to not-so-shining sea, someone has to moisten gaming's roots, and who better than the once mighty king of the arcades: Midway. There's a lot (tons actually) to be said for the easy-to-grasp, hard-to-master arcade goodness of yesteryear being ushered into further generations. Not retro rehash or Pac Man plugged into a platformer...I'm talking old and improved, like Rampage Total Destruction, a game that can be summed up in two simple words: really fun. Where there once raged a small brood of hungry 2D monsters, the fine people at SCUM Soda (love the opening CG) have seen fit to test their latest brew on 3D thirsty meatheads, transforming innocent taste-testers into unlockable freakzillas for us to pound the living snot out of parodied paradises such as Las

Vegas, San Francisco, and the Big Apple. Old school play mechanics keep it fun while new ones add new depth. Rampage Rage Meters trigger...er—rampages; hidden power-ups factor into unlocking new content, and the game's modes (including various 1-4-player multiplayer modes and a single-player tour) do well to maximize their respective strengths. The action also benefits greatly from the rich 3D, good control, and a passel of upgradeable Midway-tinged monsters with an even bigger appetite for destruction.

Dave Halverson



Urban Chaos: Riot Response

"Order" is so overrated

System(s)	Xbox, PlayStation 2	Developer	Rocksteady Games
Publisher	Eidos	Available	June

To those wondering what the proper response would be to rioting and the ensuing urban chaos it would no doubt spawn, we at Play suggest violence. Pure, unadulterated, face-exploding violence is the answer—and plenty of it.

Slow-motion shots of vaporized thug heads punctuate Urban Chaos: Riot Response's first-person perspective firefights. The violence here is so persistent and so exuberant, Eidos representatives have suggested the game will need to be toned down to avoid an adults only rating from the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB).

The heroes in Response are, in fact, the good guys: policemen, firefighters, and medics. During the game's 18 levels, six of which are unlockable, players will be tasked with rescuing civilians, saving hostages, and escorting allies through perilous situations. In one fire-choked stage, the hero had to shepherd an A.I.-



controlled firefighter through a burning building, issuing simple commands to clear obstacles and suppress blazes.

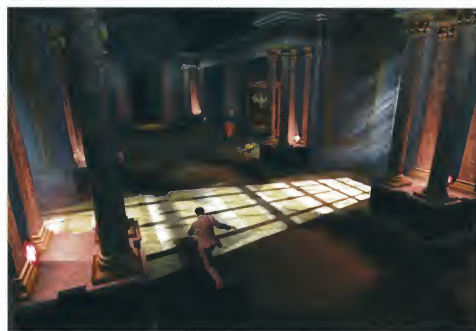
Neat elements allow players to wade through a hail of fire with a protective riot shield, incapacitate enemies with a Tazer (or fry them with an extended charge), and then climb into a helicopter because, hey, a chain gun is a good way to keep the peace while getting out some much-needed aggression. Greg Orlando



Da Vinci Code

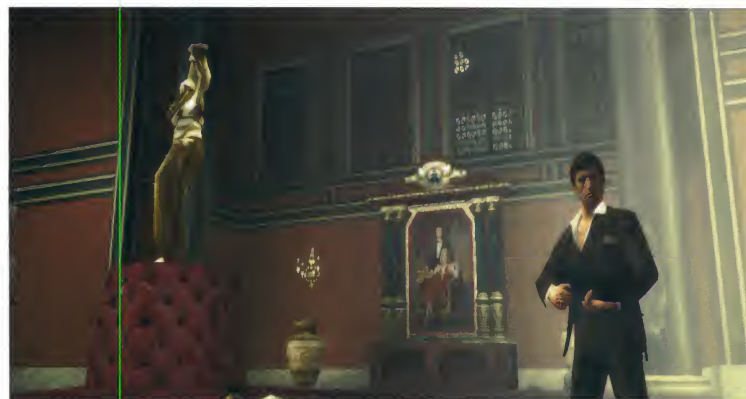
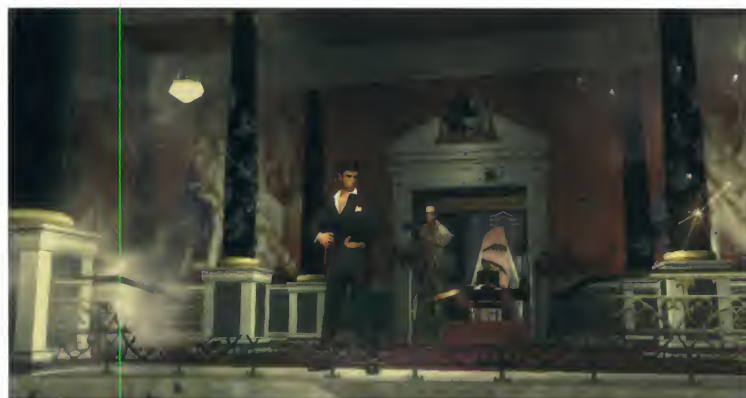
System(s)	PlayStation 2, Xbox	Publisher	2K Games
Developer	The Collective	Available	May

You know the book that's sold 68 quintillion copies, but no one actually knows what the hell it's about? Well, they're making a movie about it, and 2K Games plans a video game version. One thing's for sure: you should buy two copies or Dan Brown might not be able to afford Paraguay.



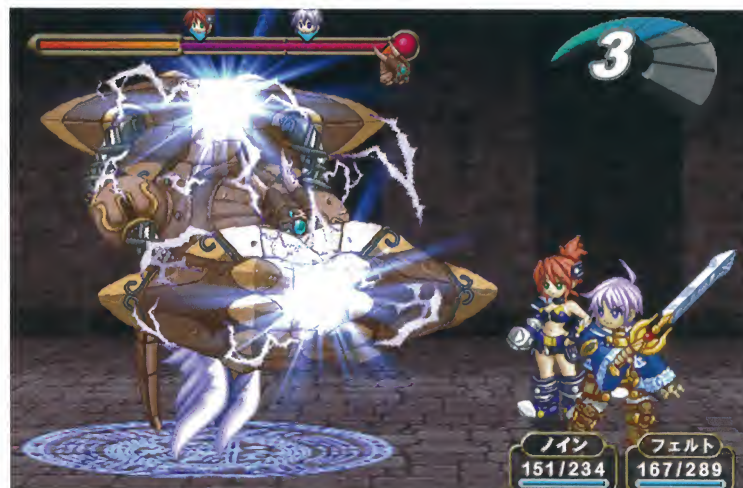
Scarface: The World is Yours

System(s)	PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC	Publisher	Vivendi Universal
Developer	Radical Entertainment	Available	October



Congratulations on escaping death, Tony Montana, and also for owning the world. Apparently, the protagonist in the classic film Scarface didn't die and will be running around consoles and PCs in good and violent fashion. Will Al Pacino play a part in this game? Say hello to my little friend: disappointment.

Atelier Iris 2: The Azoth of Destiny



System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	NIS America
Developer	Gust	Available	April

Atelier Iris 2 is of two minds on the subject of role-playing games. One of its characters goes out on monster-whomping adventures while the other sits at home, staring at the moron box eating bon bons—by which it is meant she manufactures both weapons and items for her friend. Expect anime-style turn-based goodness.



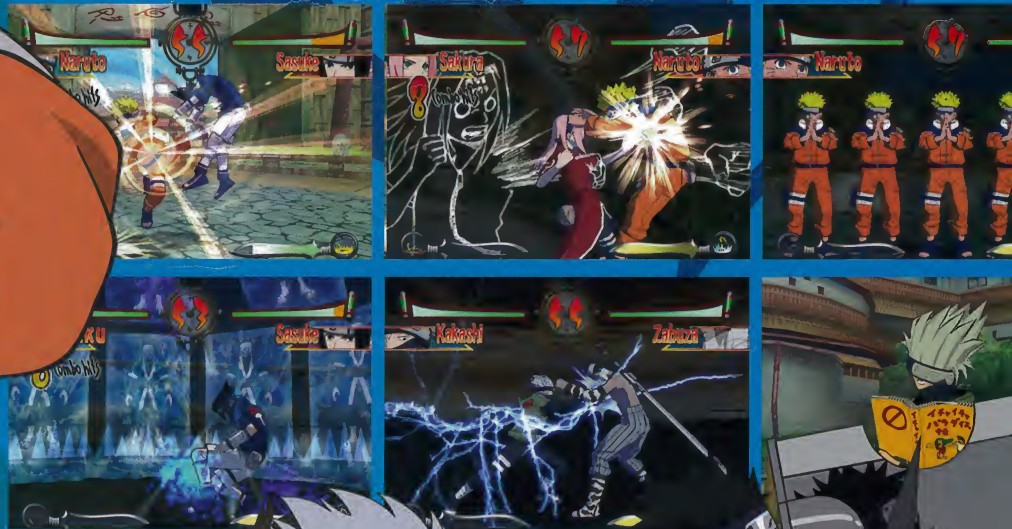
Rogue Trooper

System(s)	PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC	Publisher	Eidos
Developer	Rebellion	Available	May

As bad mothers go, the blue-hued Rogue Trooper ranks between Shaft and clones of Shaft. Trooper's missions take him across the desolate Nu-Earth and there's both an emphasis on stealth (the game features one-hit kills on unsuspecting targets) and balls-out gunfighting. Oh, and his dead friends' bio-chips now power his gun, backpack, and helmet respectively.

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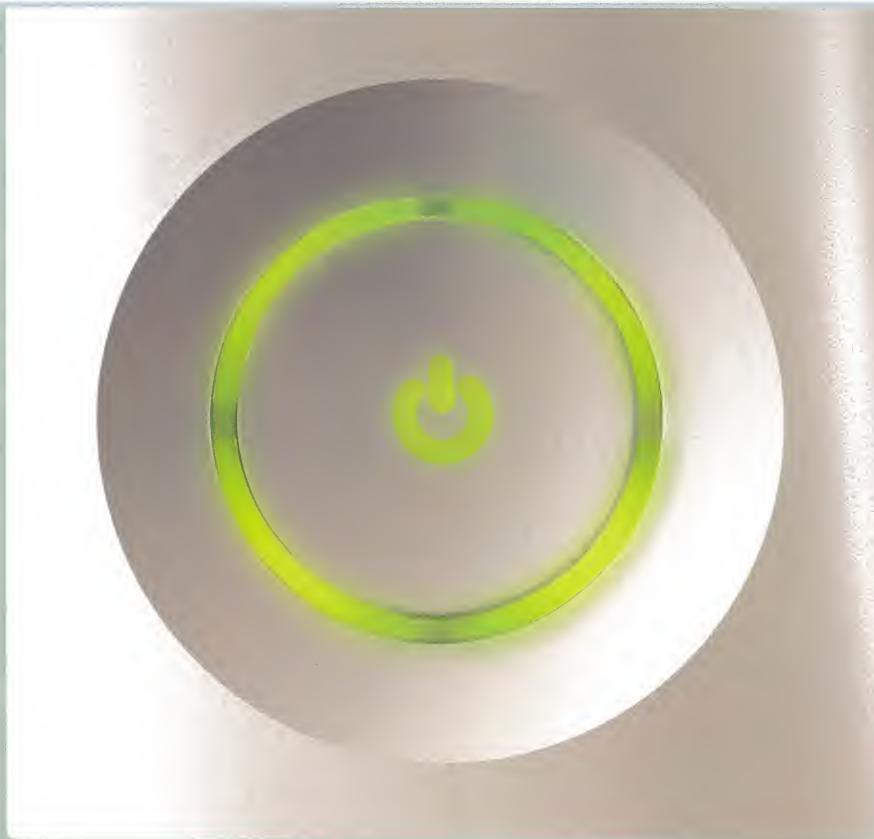


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The Zen of Xbox 360

I like that I can play music on my Xbox

words **Brady Fiechter**

Alrighty kids, let's have fun with numbers. Since the Xbox 360 unloaded around 326,000 units at launch on November 22—a good 230,000 less than the Xbox before it—holiday sales had topped around 1.3 million, with recent reports from some analysts foreseeing as many as 12 million swirly boxes out the door by the close of the holiday 2006. During its limited rollout for Christmas of 1985, the Nintendo Entertainment System sold 50,000 of its 60 million final tally; PlayStation moved over 100,000 out the door its first weekend in September 1995, planting the initial seeds for a 100 million worldwide crop.

Place a little perspective on all these random numbers spread-sheet folks love to throw around, and you're left with a lot of nonsense in the brains of the gamer whose own analysis comes down to one very important factor: Am I stoked to be the owner of my new video game system?

Now that the Xbox 360 has been out for a while, everyone's had a chance (well,

at least the lucky everyone who was able to secure one, considering the shortage problem—irrelevant in the larger scheme of things... let's worry about content instead, shall we?) to wear it in and come to grips with the good and the bad. The big failure/success discussion right now seems to revolve around a speculative future that involves competitors who've yet to show their hand—and no, fake videos from Sony and posturing from Nintendo is not that hand. I'm more interested in how the Xbox 360 delivers in the insulation of my living room, relying on nothing but the scope of the moment, when I'm dialed into its virtual world. Over the past few months, I've experienced new and exciting moments with this incredibly capable hardware, and that is a success in a most important way. If this is but a storefront window offering a hint of the bike waiting inside, at least my childlike joy has been stoked with a beguiling glimpse.

I'm not here to announce a winner in a console war that has yet to begin. Personal

experience with this intriguing new technology's my concern. My opinion's not being generated from a complex machine of insightful industry gears and intricate facts and figures. I feel something, sense something different for the possible future of games, and that's any techno geek's wet dream. Save the truth for another column that the launch games are rehashed, disappointedly ported over, safe, typically mechanical marches to market. That's the industry right now, and probably will be for a very long time. What's sticking with me is the nuance of technological and paradigm changes that drive the 360 experience.

Part of that is the communal energy that sucks you in like a gravity you've never felt before. A while back, I emailed a friend I had lost touch with through Xbox Live, discovering his gamer-tag. Late one night, the X-quadrant on the keenly designed controller lit up, and so did the smile on my face. It was the first time I'd communicated through Live like this, and the sensation was admittedly a kick. Cave men used to grunt to corral their friends; I get to send digital commands through a virtual universe of polygonal images and hi-definition liquid crystals. Geeks love this stuff.

And you have to love the new presentation. The "it's just the same games only in hi-def" critics deserve their voice, but they're missing the power of the new imagery. Anyone who plays Xbox 360 on

a traditional television simply shouldn't be playing. This thing consumes you on the proper television, creating the illusion of an actual space in a way that no game system has been capable of before. We're on the verge of truly hypnotic experiences, where the ability to lose sight of our reality is a profound possibility. The Xbox 360, no matter how temporal or miscalculated, is at the very least an awesome barometer of the near future. It's both exciting and even a little dangerous. Imagine: an industry where the product is no longer product, but a platform for new ways of expression in the game world.

Maybe the Xbox 360 came at the wrong time, maybe it's bad for the health of a rather diseased industry in need of retooled inoculations. I'd love to see Microsoft (or Sony) fail, at least then all this bullish competition could give way to more unified, explicit vision on a singular platform. Whatever the outcome in what's gonna amount to the biggest showdown yet in games, I want content, and then I'll crown my personal winner. Mean time, Tomb Raider: Legend is about to land, and my Xbox 360 is in dire need of some attention.

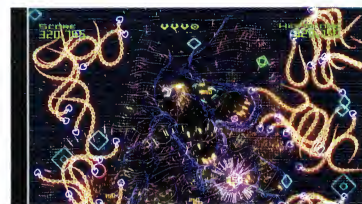
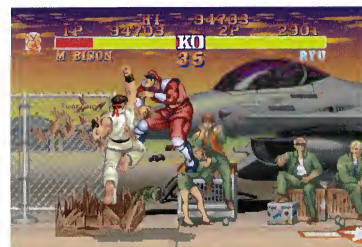
“Over the past few months, I’ve experienced new and exciting moments with this incredibly capable hardware...”

Live Arcade: Untapped Magic

I like that I can play music on my Xbox 360, but my CD player and iPod work far better on their own, and whenever the option is there, I never default to Xbox 360. It's cool and all that movies work too, but the output is kind of average compared to most DVD players, and with blu-ray on the way, obsolescence is likely to follow. The multimedia convergence that's supposed to be a big part of the 360 experience is all well and good, but I hope most of you share my opinion in that we want a system that plays kick ass games in different ways than we've become accustomed to. Forget all that other crap. Live Arcade is why the 360 gets my final seal of approval.

Right now, some of those best games, like the incurably addictive *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved*, are on Live Arcade. Classic gaming is about to reemerge in serious force, and new projects born out of simple gameplay and quick fixes are finally poised for serious success. Few will argue the value behind Xbox Live Arcade, but I believe the reach of its potential and the impact it can have on modern gaming is tremendous—and important. Just recently, *Street Fighter II* was announced for Live Arcade, hinting toward the obvious floodgates that are about to be opened. It's one thing to have a favorite classic available to play from your private collection; it's a new way of opening

the experience when these games not only can be played with friends over the internet, but in a way that becomes freshly addictive within the dynamic of the modern delivery system. Everything will be collected in one central location, where you can log in at the press of a button and instantly find a favorite game from your past. The process of classic gaming will be entirely restructured, and that new spin is going to change the way older gamers react to the pull of nostalgia. Xbox Live Arcade isn't brilliant; it's simply overdue, the right technology emerging at a time we've never needed it more.



One of the best games of yesterday, one of the best games of today... available for a few bucks, all in one place.

Condemned: Moving the Genre Forward



Everyone has their favorite launch game, but there's one that's gotten little attention and deserves giant props. *Condemned: Criminal Origins* is an mixed bag in some ways, falling into stretches of monotony and flat dialogue choices. It's also filled with incredible tension, original ideas and enemies that carry a creepy awareness. We often talk of immersion in games; here was an instance where I was completely submerged under the awesome darkness of *Condemned's* real-world setting of horror. More games like this, please...

HDMI?
The million-dollar question: why doesn't the Xbox 360 have DVI (Digital Visual Interface) or HDMI (High-Definition Multimedia Interface) output? Considering the HDMI specification has been around since 2002 and some twenty million HDMI-equipped devices shipped in the last year alone, many found it odd that the new 'box could only achieve its high-definition output via conventional analog specs like component and VGA. Both DVI and HDMI provide cleaner, fixed-pixel (1:1) image mapping and digital fidelity. HDMI has more than twice the bandwidth required for full high-def (720p, 1080i, 1080p) digital video, 48-bit color depth and multi-channel Dolby Digital sound—all inside one little cable. As if this torrent of acronyms wasn't already spiraling out of control, the UDI (Unified Display Interface) specification is poised to enter the monitor scene this year. Microsoft played it safe by sticking with good 'ole analog video in the first 360 model, as the vast majority of potential users have a compatible display. Things will change when the console's proposed external HD movie player arrives. Heavy-duty Digital Rights Management (DRM) is going to kick-in with the arrival of high-definition home video formats. If you don't have a compliant display, HD movies will be down-sampled to DVD resolutions on your set. And even if your display is compliant (i.e., most new HDTVs), you'll have to connect to it using a digital lead before the devices will recognize each other and approve the film's high-def stream. One way or another, the Xbox 360 will likely need DVI or HDMI before year's end. *Mike Griffin*

Best selling game to date

Call of Duty 2

Worst selling game at launch

Ridge Racer 6

Number of games sold per system

around 4

Percentage of hardware owners on Live

50%

Most popular Live Arcade game

Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved, with nearly 50,000 downloads

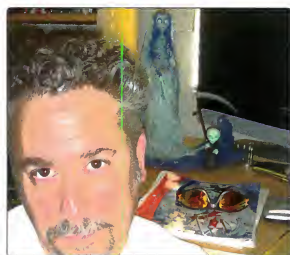
Games Available to date

22+

Average Price of Games

Too much

play
Staff "Round-up"



Dave Halverson
Editor in Chief

Favorite genres: Platformers, adventure, motocross, action-RPGs, 2D action
Now playing: *Daxter*, *Tomb Raider: Legend*, *Death Jr.*, *Gunstar Heroes: Treasure Box*, *JSRF*
Top 3 films all-time: *Blade Runner*, *Kill Bill 1&2*, *Gladiator*

Dave can't seem to let go of the past or get enough of the future, causing a strange genetic abnormality to take place. Immune to the burden of sleep or adulthood *E Storm* plays games new and old, both console and handheld by day, and fades away into any number of strange Japanese cartoons by night leaving only time to write it all down and ponder the true meaning of the universe.

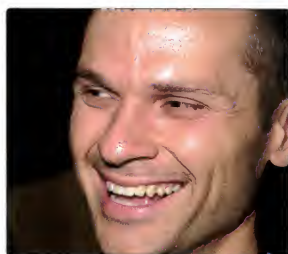


Nick Des Barres
Japan Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, Action, Adventure, Fighting, Shooters
Now playing: *Genso Suiikoden V*
Top 3 films all-time: 2001, *Seven Samurai*, *Pistol Opera* by Seijun Suzuki

Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: *Trojan*, by Capcom, on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming-roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "*Trojan*" and insist it be called "*Tatakai No Banka (Elegy For Battle)*", but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting.

Samurai Champloo: Sidetracked 046
Shadow Hearts: From the New World 050
Metal Gear Solid 3 Subsistence 052
Steamboat Chronicles 053
Onimusha Dawn of Dreams 054
Burnout Revenge 056
Suikoden V 057



Brady Fiechter
Executive Editor

Favorite genres: Adventure, first-person shooters, action, RPGs
Now playing: *Bumpy Trot*, *TR: Legend*
Top 3 films all-time: 2001, *American Beauty*, *Alien*

Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Thao-ist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.



Casey Loe
Contributing Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, hummingbird simulators
Now playing: *Shadow Hearts*, *Ryu Ga Gotoku*
Top 3 films all-time: *Fight Club*, *Spirited Away*, *Lord of the Rings Trilogy*

Casey had a promising future as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze, pills, and his all-consuming hatred of *Final Fantasy VIII* ultimately left him incompressible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about *Squall Leonhart* to winos, schizophrenics, and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.

Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter 058
Rumble Roses XX 059
Black 060
Beatmania 062
State of Emergency 2 062
Bits Reviews 063



Greg Orlando
Associate Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling
Now playing: *Burnout Revenge*
Top 3 films all-time: *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*, *This is Spinal Tap*, *Star Trek II*

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the *Cola Wars* thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...



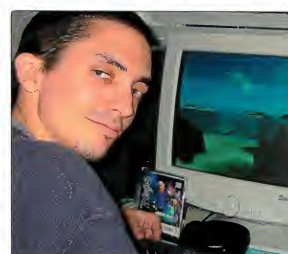
Eric Patterson
Contributing Editor

Favorite genres: Survival Horror, puzzle, music + Bermani, 2D SNK fighters
Now playing: *tetris DS*, *Drill Dozer*
Top 3 films all-time: *Star Wars Episode 4*, *Battle Royal*, *Dawn of the Dead*

Eric's reason for over two decades of video gaming is simple: so far, real life has yet to provide him access to zombies, quiet resort towns overrun with demons, ghosts you can trap with a camera, or, you know, a flesh and blood Jill Valentine or Ashley Graham. Mind getting on that, real life?

Reviews

April 2006



Mike Griffin
PC Editor

Favorite genres: MMORPGs, first-person shooters, action-adventure
Now playing: *Exteel*
Top 3 all-time films: *Hmmm...*

Even as a wee lad playing *Zaxxon* on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.



Mike Hobbs
Art Director

Favorite genres: Action, racing, adventure, alternative, shooters
Now playing: *Super Princess Peach*
Top 3 films all-time: 2001, *Apocalypse Now*, *Sleeper*

A gamer since *Space Invaders*, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of ideal developers. He's also recently become addicted to RC sailplane flying, so you'll actually find him outside now, absorbing the sun's photons.



Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence

p52

The question with any release is, of course, whether or not it's worth buying if you already have the original. In Nick's case, that answer was most definitely yes.

Our rating system

Our scores represent both a game's technical merits and our personal opinions based on our expertise within each genre, of which the numbers alone do not necessarily tell the whole story. A perfect 10 represents a game that is flawless in the reviewer's opinion. Such a high standard means that 10s will be incredibly rare, but when it happens, it symbolizes that this game is the best, a modern classic.

10. Perfect
9. Extraordinary
8. Great
7. Good
6. Decent
5. Average
4. Below average
3. Poor
2. Bad
1. Terrible

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System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Bandai/Namco	Available	May
Developer	Grasshopper	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	Teen

Samurai Champloo

Sidetracked

There's no such thing as a free ride

words Dave Halverson

Samurai Champloo begins in perfunctory fashion for anime's most dysfunctional trio, with Mugen boarding a ship to nowhere lured by the promise of free grub. Indebted to the slight-framed, yet imminently cute and saucy Fuu, super samurais Mugen and Jin (a.k.a. yin and yang, fire and ice...) are bound by a simple vow: to escort Fuu on her journey to find the "samurai who smells of sunflowers". Fuu saved their behinds and so for the time being she owns them. Once that goal is achieved, Mugen and Jin plan on dueling to the death: Until then it's a fight (mostly for food) to the finish. Unfortunately for Mugen (definitely the crash test dummy of the trio) about the only thing he ingests in Sidetracked is a throat full of burrowing serpent courtesy of a busty witch-cum-hideous-demon, giving him three days to find a snake charmer to neutralize the poison or pack his bags for croak city.

In this "missing episode" written and directed specifically for the game, the emphasis is on two things: wicked

swordplay (if Neo and Morpheus were samurai they'd be Mugen and Jin), and ultra-slick presentation. Along the way there are RPG elements galore, a great story, mini-games (grub, grub—beetle fight!) and bosses, but Samurai Champloo is—as it should be—all about supernatural samurai action. Much like Ubisoft Montreal did for the Prince of Persia rebirth, Grasshopper has developed a proprietary fighting style explicitly for Champloo that is unlike any other. Revolving around rhythm and counter attacks, the trick is to chain together strikes in conjunction with the button prompts displayed on your combo tree (depending on what track you're spinning) to fill the tension gauge and initiate "Tate" mode, by striking a designated opponent while the gauge is full. Filling the gauge has a methodology all its own (tech guards and counters work best) but the place you wanna be is in Tate. Chain together 100 hits in Tate and it's onto Fever. Talk about a samurai disco party. It's easier than it sounds but most importantly really carries the game into

"Grasshopper has developed a proprietary fighting style explicitly for Champloo that is unlike any other"





unexplored hack 'n' slash territory.

They say beauty is in the eye of the beholder but I can already sense the K7 detractors lining up to spout off on how bland Samurai Champloo looks. I completely disagree. Once Mugen penetrates the snow and fog, Grasshopper's unique artistry really takes hold, and the interludes look great. Tethering the camera to each character's backside (Jin and a mystery guest are also playable) will either eliminate or stir up the dimensionally impaired (I prefer a free camera but understand the choice) and the voice acting and music are flawless.

Samurai Champloo is by no means perfect—the repetition bug nibbles away now and again and the characters lack subtle animation nuances such as walking—but for what it is, and more over what its fans expect, it smells pretty damn sweet.

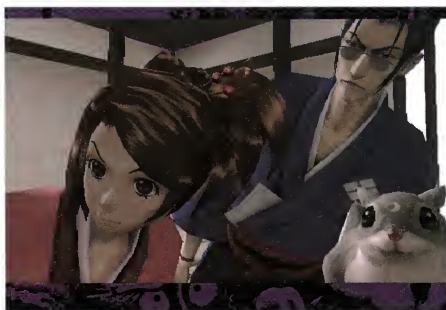
Samurai Champloo: Sidetracked

score **8.0**

- + Wonderfully stylized, excellent combat system
- Slightly repetitive battles



Fuu you
Jin and Fuu both
play major roles: Jin
is playable and Fuu
eats her way into the
action.



An interview with Grasshopper Director

Suda Gouichi

Samurai Champloo is an important game. Maybe not in the grand scheme of things like a GTA or Metal Gear, but for anime and Adult Swim fans it's a big deal. After the Cowboy Bebop debacle (it wasn't pretty to the extent that Bandai didn't even bother localizing it) and staring down enough anime-based fighting games to plug the hole in the ozone, we needed to see an anime franchise done right in this country other than Ghost in the Shell. Luckily Grasshopper has delivered a game smells like sunflowers instead of Mugen's stinky pits. Bandai were wise to consign the Edo period meets hip-hop stylings of Samurai Champloo to the equivalent dev-team at Grasshopper (the avant-garde maestros of Capcom's Killer 7). We caught up with resident brain trust and creative director Suda Gouichi just prior to the games completion...

Was the Champloo game something you went after or were you chosen specifically by Bandai for the project?

"Samurai Champloo" came about from Bandai's search for a suitable project that Grasshopper could undertake. It was highlighted amongst a list of selections I'd received, and coincidentally, I'd just finished watching the first episode. So, I decided to discuss its adaptation into a video game, knowing already that it was a quality anime. You could say that it was a match made in heaven.

Did you work with Manglobe on the game design and story?

Our relationship with Manglobe is pretty easy-going, so when it came down to game genre, they left it up to us. By having Mr. Watanabe look over the script, we were able to achieve story and voice acting quality that stayed loyal to the anime series. In Japan, it can get pretty hairy when game designers and animators collaborate, but in this case, I believe that we were able to complement each other with our specialized talents.

Was this game created more for the Japanese or Western market? Is Champloo still all the rage in Japan?

We've perfected our signature cel-shading style, as seen in "Killer 7," just for our target audience in North America. I believe that the popularity of "Samurai Champloo" in Japan has undoubtedly penetrated the subcultural layer. It has an especial draw with the young and acute layer whose discerning tastes are able to sniff out quality anime.

Did you come up with the Rhythm Track, Technique Guard and Counters, Tension Gauge, Hyper Mode, and Tate Combos right from the start, or did the layers of attacks evolve as you went along?

The Tension Gauge, Hyper Mode, and Tate Mode were already established in the specifications. The name for Rhythm Track was already determined, but the actual mode itself is completely different from what was originally intended. There are many elements that were expanded during the process of development, such as the Technique Guard and Counters and the Rhythm Tracks. We designed an innovative system with the U.S. players in mind.

When a player scores a 100-hit Tate combo, it's followed by a Trance or Hyper mode in which 100 hits earns an item. Are these items rare or would they



eventually be available to purchase?

You could say that the items you unlock during Trance Mode are rare, since most of the items can't be acquired unless you're in it. There're also rare weapons that can be unlocked by repeating Trance Mode multiple times.

Aside from purchasing weapons and health items, players must also spend money on new records to alter their combo trees. I know that both are key, but which is more important as the game evolves: having a deep record selection or always having the most powerful weapons?

If you're after style, a great track selection is essential. If you're looking to boost your strength, weapons & items are the way to go. But the biggest feature in "Samurai Champloo" is the track selection, so you should definitely try out all of the tracks.

Seems like the best weapons wear out fast. Are they gone once they break or do they rejuvenate?

The best weapons are designed to be the most fragile. When they do break, you can take them to the weaponsmith in the castle town and have them repaired.

Like Killer 7, Samurai Champloo seems more about style and technique than elaborate architecture. Would you say that this is your calling card, or is this a product of the current hardware set?

It is certainly not influenced by hardware. Grasshopper emphasizes a design that is heavy on style & technique. Part of our job is to eke out ideas that have not yet been manifested. First and foremost in our design process is to strive for a game style that is unparalleled by any other which could be appreciated by players in North America, Europe, and Japan. But in terms of next generation platforms, we do anticipate more complex designs in the future.

Any interest in developing a game based on platforming or stealth in the future?

That would be great. I'm very interested in doing that! If there's such an offer on the horizon, there is no doubt that I'll be at the table to discuss some serious business.

The CG version of the anime-opening features humanized versions of Jin, Mugen, and Fuu (especially Fuu who looks like a different person) while the in-game cinemas feature characters religious to the anime. Who produced the CG opening theme?

Jet Studio is the one who made the CG. They have an extremely talented staff that worked on some famous games (such as Namco titles) in Japan. Since Fuu is the epitome of a Japanese anime character, it was very difficult to portray her as a realistic figure.

Grasshopper possesses among the most unique art and gameplay styles in gaming: you've managed to make simple fighting action fun and intriguing where so many have failed. What do you see as the most beneficial aspect of next-generation game development? Do you feel developers are concentrating too much on normal-mapping and not enough on innovative gameplay?

Normal-mapping will be the death of major game titles to come. Meanwhile, developers like us will be striving to design innovative gameplay, and I'm certain that players of North America and Europe will be supportive of this as well. We are able to create games that the player feels connected to, and with the Revolution, I predict that the new controller will have an influence on the gameplay itself.

Did Fat Jon assist with track selection? If not, was the music done in house?

Since it was difficult to obtain licensing for the tracks from the anime, all of the in-game tracks were made by Grasshopper. Masashi Takada is the audio director, whose soundtrack for "Killer 7" was awarded by EDGE magazine.

What's the background of the studio? From where do your members hail?



Jin is as ice cold as samurai get.



"I respect Mr. Kojima very much. But to me, video games are 'playable art...'"



Tate combo time: Slices and dices.

We are developers composed of about 40 staff members. Most are in their late 30s** and come from Human Corporation (which went under already).

Surely there is much to uncover and unlock within Samurai Champloo's branching story. Sure would be nice if Fuu opened up as a playable character...

Oh! Sorry to disappoint you. Fuu is not a playable character...

Hideo Kojima says "games are not art". Do you agree or disagree?

I respect Mr. Kojima very much. But to me, video games are "playable art", and as such, superior art should not be boring and should be blurring the lines between art and games.

Thank you for your time. Any comments to all the Samurai Champloo fans out West?

In Japan, we're aware that "Samurai Champloo" is quite popular in North America, so we created a game with the gamers and anime fans in

mind. Fans will be able to witness a new land, as Mugen, Jin, and Fuu journey to Hokkaido (in those days, it was called "Ezo"), which sets the stage for the game. Hokkaido is a place that's blessed with ample foodstuff, and plenty of delicious cuisines. Recently, the "soup curry" is pretty popular, but of course there's always the ramen. Oh, you don't know about ramen? It's a Chinese-style noodle dish adopted by the Japanese, which these days, is considered a national food. The next time you visit Japan, try the ramen. Pretty much everyone in Japan can be treated as a ramen expert, so it's possible that if you ask someone for advice, you'll get a 10-minute speech on which restaurants are the best.

But I digress... I would like gamers to enjoy the Rhythm Track system and the variety of play modes. The fighting style is comparable to other samurai sword games, but it'll keep you on the edge of your seat.

Look out for "Samurai Champloo: Sidetracked"!

System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Aruze	Available	March
Developer	Nautilus	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	Teen

Shadow Hearts

From The New World

If you don't buy this, it means you hate America



I'm going to drop the above-it-all reviewer tone and level with you—I haven't played a Shadow Hearts game since 1999's *Koudelka*, and I thought that game thoroughly sucked. I meant to do some research and play through *Shadow Hearts: Covenant* before I wrote this review, but I ran out of time and frankly, I figured I could just BS it.

Shadow Hearts is just one of those mediocre, B-list RPG series that no one really cares about, right?

I don't know that I've ever been more wrong. At some point the *Shadow Hearts* series became legitimately good and *no one bothered to tell me*. Lest you all make the same mistake, I'm spreading the word: This game is good, and not in a little-game-with-good-ideas sort of way. Even though no one actually bought any of their previous titles, the staff of Nautilus has drained their kids' college funds to make a game that has both great ideas and high production values.

One of the game's greatest assets is the Judgment Ring battle system, which bases accuracy, critical hits and even your success at haggling on well-timed button presses. I wasn't a



Your party
No posse is complete without
a rotund humanoid cat.



fan of the hit-the-button-for-more-damage trend when it was briefly fashionable ten years ago, but *Shadow Hearts* has refined the concept to feel smooth and rhythmic, like someone spilled a cup of Dance Dance Revolution in your turn-based RPG. (If you still hate the thought of an RPG that requires twitchy reflexes, know the system can be toned down or turned off entirely.) The battles involve a great deal of wit as well; by saving up "stock" energy you can take double turns or use elaborate multi-character combos to pummel a foe for as long as you can keep scoring hits. And each character has his or her own personal special ability, from Shania's transformative fusion ability to Ricardo's mariachi tunes, which adds a welcome layer of depth and flavor.

Shadow Hearts could coast on its battle system alone, but it doesn't. Random encounters are relatively rare, allowing you to explore freely and concentrate on each dungeon's special gimmick. Some are as simple as gathering key cards or flipping switches, but many

"At some point the Shadow Hearts series became legitimately good and no one bothered to tell me."

involve elaborate puzzles. The areas are clever but not overly long, as Nautilus has resisted the temptation to drag out the game with a higher battle rate and pointless corridor mazes. Some may complain about the 30-hour length, but this is a tight, fast-paced 30 hours that's free of the usual tedious dungeon crawls.

Shadow Hearts: From the New World ostensibly takes place during the Great Depression, but you could easily go mad counting continuity errors in the first five minutes alone (Rock and roll hasn't been invented yet! Civil War veterans shouldn't still be alive! The Phantom of the Opera opened in the 1980's!) While it isn't so much with the history, the North and South American settings do give the game an original flavor.

The story has a decent Lovecraftian mystery at its center, but it strays so far from the series' gothic horror roots that you almost have to classify it as a comedy. When you spend half your time rescuing the Roswell aliens, busting Al Capone out of Alcatraz, and helping a talking cat finance his all-cat movie studio (Purramount, ha ha), it's hard to take the game even remotely seriously. The jokes hit the mark surprisingly often, but there are times when the humor falls flat and

leave you feeling deeply embarrassed for everyone involved. Some of these comic bombs are simply in poor taste; developers looking for international acceptance should probably avoid playing flamboyantly gay characters for laughs and having a heavily built black butler call a 16-year old boy "master." (Just a little tip from the New World to you, Nautilus.)

Even when the comedy works, I'd rather cut it out entirely and play the darker, edgier game promised by the CG intermissions. That team apparently didn't get the memo about the tonal shift, and they're not the only ones; half the environments in From the New World seem transplanted from Kingdom Hearts, while the other half would fit comfortably in Silent Hill. A similar percentage of characters are serious players in the story,



Now that's a knife SHF's is a story fit for Uwe Boll.

while the other half feel like shoehorned-in comic relief. I do find Frank to be funny, but I'd lose him, the talking cat, and that shrill vampire thing in a heartbeat (the mariachi can't stay—I'm not sure why, but I love that guy). The game's story isn't bad, but it's more a mishmash of subplots than a single focused tale. There is a lot of talent at work here, but the game would be stronger if someone had gotten them all on the same page.

Nautilus hasn't quite succeeded at making an epic masterpiece, but most of the game's pieces are at that level. Even the most jaded of RPG fans will appreciate the clever battle system, well-crafted

environments and sporadically great tunes. I wish I could say that this game will be the series' breakout smash, but I know this quirky gem has "cult classic" written all over it. I'm just happy to have discovered it at all.

Shadow Hearts: From the New World

score **8.5**

- + Top-notch design and surprisingly good sound and graphics.
- A comedy RPG? Really?



System(s) PS2
Developer Konami: Kojima Productions

Publisher Konami
Online/Multi 8 player + PSP connectivity

Available March
ESRB Rating M

MGS Subsistence

More than enough to subsist on until MGS4

words Nick Des Barres

Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence is the best "enhanced re-release" ever. There, I said it. All this content -- three discs of it -- for only thirty buck? It's almost too good to be true. Konami could have released the online disc alone and sold it at full price, and I wouldn't have complained. Heck, they could have even charged a monthly fee. It's that good. But before I get ahead of myself, let's break it down disc-by-disc.

DISC 1: Subsistence

Content-wise, this is the original MGS3, though several all-new facepaints and an array of camouflage patterns that were previously only available by inserting copies of the soundtrack CDs in the Japanese version of the game have been added. It would have been nice to have a full collection of all the download-only threads that Kojima Productions has released over the last year (not to mention a more intuitive way of switching between them), but we take what we can get. The big draw here is an all-new camera system (the original is also selectable), reportedly based on the scheme designed for MGS4. Gone is the overhead view, a holdover from the very first Metal Gear on MSX way back in 1987, replaced with a spanking new ready-for-2006 behind-the-character dynamic camera, fully controllable via the right stick. Unlike many, I never really had a problem with the original camera system, but playing Subsistence is something of a revelation. You begin to realize that this is the way MGS was always meant to be. You're able to process information on your surroundings a lot faster, without having to constantly switch into first-person view and become immobile. Disc 1: MGS3, only better.

DISC 2: Persistence

The meat. As I said above, Konami could have released this disc as Metal Gear Online and charged full price. There's not enough room to go into its intricacies, but I'll recap all the online play modes here. First is Deathmatch, a free-for-all, PC FPS style fragfest. Those wanting a less hectic experience might opt for Team Deathmatch, which pits two teams of

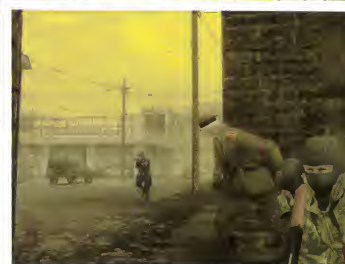
players against each other, mixing competitive and cooperative play. In Sneaking Mission, my favorite mode, one lucky player gets to control Snake (usually you control a nameless KGB, GRU, or Ocelot Unit soldier), who attempts to steal microfilm guarded by the other players. If someone manages to defeat him, they get to play as Snake next. Capture Mission is a "capture-the-flag"-style game, in which two teams attempt to bring Kerotan frogs back to their home base. Finally, there is the curiously-named Rescue Mission, in which an attacker team attempts to steal cargo located in the defender team's compound and bring it to a goal point. Yes indeed, Persistence's online mode is tons of fun, and best of all, it's 100% free. Rounding out Disc 2 are a new boss rush mode, extra levels for Snake VS. Monkey, and... wait for it...the original MSX versions of Metal Gear and Solid Snake: Metal Gear 2, available for the first time in English. Metal Gear fans wishing to find out more about Solid Snake and Big Boss's relationship or the interaction and subsequent duel between Snake and Gray Fox now finally have the chance.

DISC 3: Existence

Existence is the least of the three discs, containing a newly-edited, three-and-a-half-hour long movie-style presentation of MGS3's storyline. It's very slickly produced, but when you're in all likelihood going to be playing through the main game again anyway, probably not worth your time. Finally, a high-resolution version of the stunning MGS4 trailer that debuted at Tokyo Game Show 2005 is available.



The question with any re-release is, of course, whether or not it's worth buying if you already have the original. In my case, that answer was most definitely yes. The amount of content spread across these three discs is truly staggering, and Persistence is a quick, pick-up-and-play online experience that offers tremendous variety. Heck, it's only \$30: If you missed MGS3 for whatever reason, your excuses for doing so just got a whole lot less convincing, and even if you played the original to death, at this price point you really can't go wrong. **play**



What would Brian Boitano do?

Metal Gear Solid 3
Subsistence

score **9.5**

+ Uh...everything.
- The fact that you have to buy MGS3 again.

"The amount of content spread across these three discs is truly staggering..."

System(s)	PS2	Publisher	Atlus	Available	May
Developer	Irem	Online/Multi	None	ESRB Rating	T

STEAMBOT CHRONICLES

Welcome the bumpy trots

words **Brady Fiechter**

least he'll fix up your own personal unit, repairing damage from battles with local gang runners who have their own reason for commandeering the trotmobiles: taking over the town!

When you're not fighting mean trotmobiles and taking care of pressing needs like securing rarities for a museum or eating cheese to appease your growing hunger, you can gain some experience and money in combat arenas, or maybe dress up your trotmobile to your specific liking and find ways to add new parts, or shoot a game of pool (I spent a few hours just playing 9 ball). Steambot Chronicles is also a music/rhythm game at times. You can join in with other musicians, or even play your instrument of choice on a street corner if you're short of cash.

And so it goes, as the quirky, free-form Steambot Chronicles moves from meandering to enjoyable to bad to infectious to goofy. It's an esoteric game that creates some of its own off-center rules while sticking to pleasant tradition. I've never played anything quite like it, and while individuality only goes so far, Steambot Chronicles is really just...fun. **play**

Steambot Chronicles

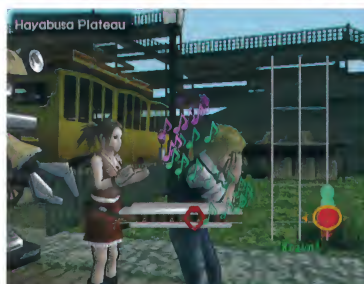
score **8.0**

- + Lots of character, unique setup, nice aesthetic.
- Kind of aimless at times, poor voice, story needs work.

he unassuming hero in Steambot Chronicles goes by the name of Vanilla. Unconscious and deprived of his memory, he's found on the beach by a lovely young woman who just wants to catch the bus. But halting her plans is a big blue machine that shoots missiles to crumble her path, which leads the pair to hop in a mech-like machine and head over to the nearby town, where people go about their business like they always do in role-playing lands—giving advice, selling goods, fixing things, providing clues and missions. But this is not a traditional RPG as much as an adventure game, driven by personal character choices and action. Will you be abrasive and cocky in response to the world's inhabitants, or more kind and respectful?

The action part of Steambot Chronicles involves one of those blue machines, called trotmobiles, which function as vehicles for labor and transportation for most anyone who's brave enough to jump on in. You soon learn the whole story from Dr. Nutmeg, who complains that humans can be evil; he also might be the only one who can restore your lost memory. As an inventor of trotmobiles, at the very

"I've never played anything quite like it..."



Master the harmonica just for kicks...



System(s) PlayStation 2
Developer Capcom

Publisher Capcom
Online/Multi None

Available March
ESRB Rating T

Onimusha

Dawn of Dreams

See? I was right about cherry trees being evil!

words Casey Lee

At this late stage of the PS2's life, most top game developers have moved on to shiny new hardware, leaving their franchises to lesser teams with just enough talent to squeeze out cookie-cutter sequels. But the developers of Onimusha: Dawn of Dreams have bucked that trend by tossing the Onimusha 3 engine and starting over from scratch. This inspired sequel brings a shot of innovation to the rapidly staling series, and proves the PS2 can still turn some heads in an X360 world.

Dawn of Dreams hasn't completely abandoned the preset cameras of Onimusha 3, but most of the areas finally give camera control to the player. Typically the free camera is planted right behind your character's shoulders, filling the screen with your movements and providing an up-close look at the game's detailed enemies and gorgeously textured environments. This beauty does come at a cost—the super-close camera sacrifices your peripheral vision and makes it hard to keep track of the action. It also makes it difficult to fight defensively against small enemies, since you have no way

of knowing when to block or counter foes whose movements are obscured by your body. Fortunately, the developers seem to be aware of these problems, and have taken steps to minimize them; most enemies are too reactive to take you unawares, and the smaller ones are typically weenies you wouldn't want to block anyway. Despite these annoyances, the new system is a drastic improvement, and the occasional fixed-camera areas do a good job of reminding you how primitive the old system was.

The other major feature in Dawn of Dreams is the introduction of allies, four characters with unique abilities who join the hero on his quest. You can journey with them one at a time, and switch places with your ally at the tap of a button. Each character has a different feel, and all are fun to play.

If played as intended in a one-player game, the ally mechanic is a fine addition. But it's even better in a hidden 2-player mode, which allows a friend to take control of the second character. This feature isn't officially supported, probably because it causes no end of camera

problems, but it's still a blast to play. (To make it work, both players should hold L2 and R1, and press Start simultaneously on the "Press Start" screen. You'll then be taken to the load screen to pick a file.)

The other changes are more modest, but fit a theme of making the game feel less like a mindless slashfest and more like... an action RPG? Well, I wouldn't go so far as Capcom does in making that claim, but it isn't entirely baseless either. You can now backtrack to old areas and find new treasures by exploiting the different characters' abilities, which gives the game a slightly Zelda-esque feel. The character customization system is



"... brings a shot of innovation to the rapidly staling series, and proves the PS2 can still turn some heads in an X360 world."





deep and interesting, and there are camp scenes between stages where you can confer with your characters, shop, and make custom items. The puzzle boxes are back too, and with a nice twist—those who don't care for the puzzles can just smash 'em and take the contents (although they'll then have to go through the hassle of getting it appraised).

The last noteworthy feature is a selectable option that can return the voices to the original Japanese. Not only does Japanese better capture that Onimusha flavor, but it allows you to pretend that the story is a lot less preposterous than it actually is. The story isn't bad per se, but it is horribly executed. Some levels are packed with an endless series of cut scenes that break up the action for no reason, and the overly abundant dialogue scenes are so bloated with clichés that it's hard not to roll your eyes. (And then there's that hideously shrill talking monkey thing. Don't even get me started on *that*.) The weird pacing pops up in other ways too; the stages vary widely in length and difficulty, and some build up villains in cut scenes but end abruptly without a boss fight, while others make you fight several bosses in a row with no explanation at all.

In Dawn of Dreams' best stages, intense gameplay, pulse-pounding music and astonishingly beautiful settings come together perfectly. The developers can't hit these high notes consistently, but it's nice to see the venerable Onimusha matching the heights of Tecmo's Ninja Gaiden, if only sporadically. While the game is uneven, its 20 hour quest contains more than enough good parts to

be worth a purchase.

Capcom has great instincts when it comes to taking care of their A-list series. Like Resident Evil a few years ago, Onimusha was one derivative sequel away from entering the Tomb Raider spiral of franchise death. Instead a timely revamp has sent the series in a promising direction and given it more momentum than it's had in years. **play**

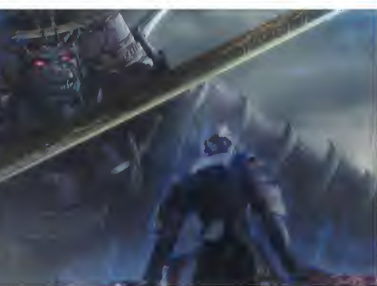
Onimusha: Dawn of Dreams

score **8.5**

Vastly improved camera and cool ally system.

Uneven level design and occasional camera difficulties.

The combat is at its best for the series.



System(s) Xbox 360

Publisher EA

Available Now

Developer Criterion

Online/Multi 1-8

ESRB Rating E

Burnout Revenge

Sweet, Sweet Revenge

words Greg Orlando

Burnout Revenge is a dish best served reheated on Xbox 360. The smashmouth car game takes a new turn on the merry-go-round with the Xbox 360, and it is, simply, brilliant.

Burnout, as a series, has always deftly blended racing with vehicular mayhem, and its Xbox 360 iteration is no different. The game originally appeared on Xbox and PlayStation 2 in 2005, but receives a dedicated facelift for the next generation and Microsoft's newest console. Now, the gorgeous cars exhibit paint scraping and flaking in addition to the massive and varied damage they can sustain performing jumps and smashing headlong into immovable objects. There are new lighting effects and better draw distances for cars and objects, too. The new effects are certainly welcome here and add to Burnout's reputation, but the impact they have is negligible. Nothing was wrong with the effects as they existed on last-generation consoles, which stands as a testament to the game's quality.

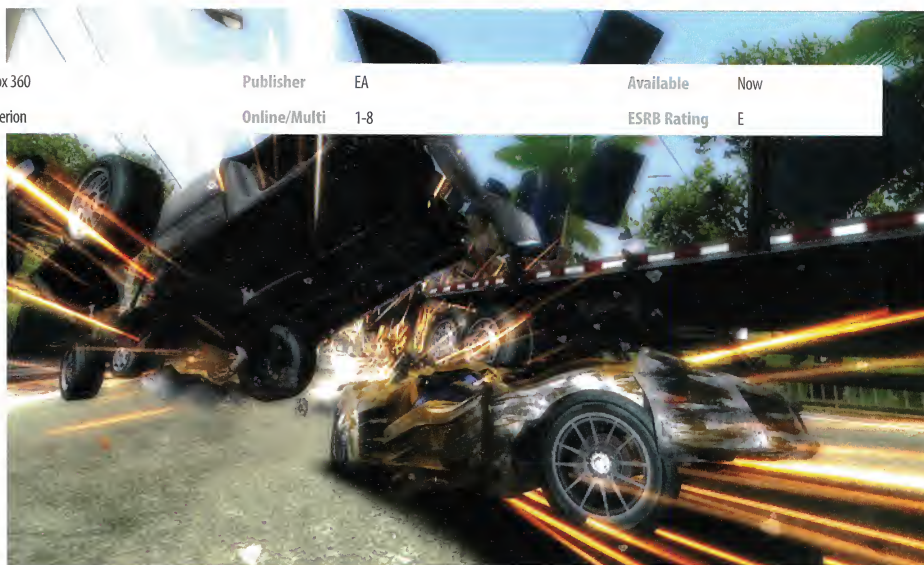
For the 360, Revenge includes 10 or so new crash challenges, simple games where the goal is to create the most spectacular traffic snarl ever. A new feature lets players record their most spectacular crashes and then post them on to Xbox Live. New cars have been

added to the mix, as have a series of game achievement awards and Xbox 360 Live-specific features. Online, the game allows for multiplayer crash competitions and tracks players' rivalries, rewarding them accordingly when they cause their foes automotive distress.

It's an upgraded version of an already classic game, to be certain. On its own merits, the game deserves purchase; it's near-perfect in its presentation, extremely fun to play, and always allows players to feel as if they've accomplished something. Its sense of speed is unrivaled, and the simple thrill of smashing the other guy into something never gets old. There are a wealth of cars, environments, and competitions to unlock, and Revenge is liberal in praising players when they perform sweet stunts. Gushing profusely does not do Revenge justice. It is perhaps the greatest arcade-style racer ever created.

There's a question, however, as to whether the game deserves to be played

"On its own merits, the game deserves purchase; it's near-perfect in its presentation..."



Professional driver on virtual course: Definitely try this at home.



twice on two separate consoles spanning two different generations. Here, the answer is not quite as clear-cut. Certainly, the online modes add much to the proceedings, as do the new crash exhibitions. Yet there's a very real issue to contend with in terms of dollars and common sense; it may be coarse or boorish to bring up economic concerns, but Revenge for the 360 carries a \$50-plus pricetag. Revenge is certainly costly proposition the second time around...and, after thoughtful consideration, not worth it for those content with their PlayStation 2 or Xbox versions.

Burnout Revenge

score 9.5

+ Better graphics, more stuff.

- You should have already played it already.



System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Konami	Available	March
Developer	Konami	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	Teen



The strength of good character design...

"The battles are as quick and furious as they were in the early days, but have a new layer of depth..."

Ten years ago I fell in love with Suikoden, and I thought that love would last forever. But Suikoden stumbled in the transition to PlayStation 2, and after the dreadful Suikoden III, we decided to just be friends. Finally, after a few years of soul-searching, Suikoden has shed its pretensions, embraced its roots, and come back to me stronger than ever. Suikoden fans—the love is back.

Suikoden V is easily twice as long as the next-longest title in the series, a length it achieves not with filler dungeons and needlessly frequent battles, but by sheer weight of story. The game begins slowly, with several hours of linear, semi-interactive storytelling that sends your young prince on a series of errands that introduce the game's huge cast and seeds future plot developments. Though this part drags a bit, the great script, well-directed event scenes and exceptional voice-acting will keep your interest from flagging. And after the lengthy prologue is

shattered by a climactic twist that marks the true start of your quest, the tempo never lets up again.

Suikoden V takes place fifteen years before Suikoden I, in the oft-mentioned but not-yet-seen Queendom of Falena. While the game stands on its own, Suikoden fans will find dozens of connections to every other game in the series, such as a side-quest epilogue to Suikoden Tactics and crossover characters from Suikoden II's cooking game.

It isn't merely the story that connects Suikoden V to the first two titles in the series. The game is rendered in 3D, but for no apparent reason—the camera remains locked in an overhead view to give the game a simplistic old-school feel. The battles are as quick and furious as they were in the early days, but have a new layer of depth with a formation system that makes character positioning a significant and interesting factor. Not

everything is old-school—the battle system used for large-scale warfare has been completely reinvented in real time and is a high-water mark for the series.

Of course, every game has its failings, and the list should be familiar to Suikoden fan: The graphics are weak, the music is hit-or-miss, and the game is exceptionally easy. (By which I mean you'll probably never die. Collecting the 108 Stars of Destiny to get the best ending is a significant challenge.) And while the story is exceptional, the finale fizzles a bit, failing to provide satisfactory explanations for major late-game plot twists.

Suikoden V has all the familiar flaws, but never has its strengths come together as tightly as they do here. This doesn't

feel like the usual bi-yearly Suikoden release, but the magnum opus of a seasoned team that has learned from recent mistakes and returned to their series with more energy and inspiration than ever before. **play**

Suikoden V

score **8.0**

- + Fantastic story and long, engaging quest.
- Graphics are primitive, battles are ridiculously easy.



System(s) PlayStation 2, Xbox, Xbox 360, PC

Publisher Ubisoft

Available March

Developer Red Storm

Online/Multi 1-16

ESRB Rating T

Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter

The War to End All Wars



words Greg Orlando

Mexico's in revolt, the Canadian prime minister is now the most powerful corpse in North America, and the U.S. president is stuck south of the border. Things could be worse, but only if there were guns—and lots of them—pointed at your head, which there most certainly are in Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter.

It's killing time. Warfighter is set in Mexico in the not-too-distant future and, accordingly, offers players a look into the future of warfare. As hardened warrior Captain Mitchell, you command a squad of three soldiers, guiding them through an almost non-stop orgy of firefights, missteps, and rescue missions.

Special optical technology included in Mitchell's helmet lets him see what his squadmates see, allowing him to send them off to guard his flank while he goes off scouting. The game pulls this off brilliantly within a tiny window in the top-left of the game screen. This technology also allows him to remotely command devices such as the UAV Cypher (a spy camera), Black Hawk helicopters, and tanks. While controlling a vehicle with offensive capabilities, Mitchell can select targets that are in his line of sight, or view the scenery from the perspective of

Never cross on the
yellow.

"As befitting a Ghost Recon title, Warfighter offers the latest and greatest in military hardware and the chance to abuse it thusly."



the vehicle. A simple push on the D-pad ensures the targets will be duly assaulted, allowing Mitchell and his squad to continue on.

Mexico City is a gorgeous deathtrap, littered with ambush zones, open plazas, and industrial sites. Navigating through its streets is a challenge, and Warfighter does an excellent job of allowing players to move freely through them in order to find the perfect approach to the target. This freedom allows for great tactics; flanking maneuvers can tear the heart out of an enemy attack before it can begin in earnest. Soldiers from one direction may pin down enemy vehicles while Mitchell approaches it from another, ensuring a deadly crossfire. Warfighter, with its liberal checkpoints and easy restarts, never punishes experimentation.

As befitting a Ghost Recon title, Warfighter offers the latest and greatest in military hardware and the chance to abuse it thusly. So the game can certainly only be faulted a little bit when it seems too eager to drop Mitchell into the gunner's spot in a helicopter (as if the things don't come with gun crews) or when it gratuitously drops in the latest in armored personnel carriers just to have them blown up in an ambush a blind cave fish could have seen coming.

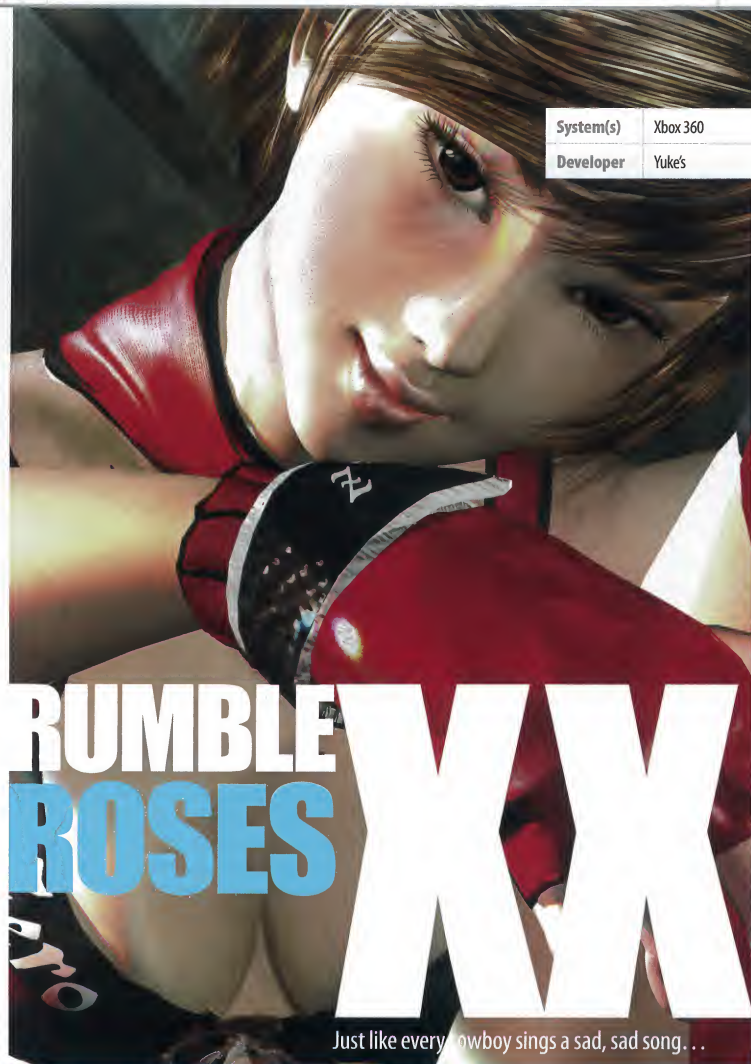
The multiplayer modes are, per the drill, excellent. The game offers both team-based and individual play, and the online lag, at least on the Xbox 360 version, was nonexistent. With 16 players and 16 guns blazing, the game is violent bliss, and certainly a war demanding to be fought over and over again. **play**



Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon:
Advanced Warfighter

score **9.0**

- + Great use of new technology; multiplayer modes are excellent
- High learning curve; many quick deaths await



RUMBLE ROSES XX

Just like every cowboy sings a sad, sad song...

words Greg Orlando

The sage words of the hair rockers in Poison ring as true now as they did back in the 20th century: every rose has its thorn.

The original Rumble Roses, released on the PlayStation 2 in 2004, was, give or take, roughly 60 percent thorn. It was a beautiful-looking all-female wrestling game, but possessed the depth and complexity of a soda commercial. Roses only allowed for one-on-one matches and possessed a crippling dearth of arenas and match types. Style ruled over substance, and the game didn't even have the good sense to let players save in the middle of its career mode.

To its great credit, Rumble Roses XX

for the Xbox 360 aspires to something greater—and certainly with more depth; say, a long-distance telephone commercial. Although the game's feature set pales in comparison to that of the more established wrestling franchises, the addition of tag-team matches, three- and four-player battle royales, and online play represents a tremendous step forward.

Go ahead and stare. XX is amazing looking, and sports high-polygon models, lots of detail in terms of hair and mammary physics, and much in the way of lighting effects. The women are all suitably gorgeous in a plastic sort of way, but they move well, and the game has been polished to eliminate a good deal of the

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Konami	Available	Now
Developer	Yuke's	Online/Multi	1-4	ESRB Rating	M



"Go ahead and stare. XX is amazing looking and sports high-polygon models..."

clipping and bad move transitions plaguing wrestling games as a whole.

Forgive the cliché, but this beauty is more than skin deep. Wrestlers' moves become more powerful with use, and the game tracks how well a grappler does at striking, reversing holds, making aerial attacks, and using dirty tactics. In this way, a player's strengths are emphasized, and the game carries this idea further by altering a wrestler's physique in subtle ways as she progresses through the single-player mode. A new tag-team alignment system adds a measure of realism and drama; if two teammates are not compatible with one another, they won't function as a cohesive unit. With poor compatibility, a teammate may refuse to tag into a match, or simply opt to leave a fight altogether.

Other new elements include queen's matches and street fights. The former is a straightforward match wherein the loser must perform some pre-arranged and humiliating task (complete with player-

adjustable camera) at its conclusion. The latter drops the women into a caged arena for what's essentially Tekken's weaker cousin—call it Suckken—with breastacular females and a mode-imbalancing a power meter that fills insanely fast, allowing the combatants to pull off wildly powerful killer and lethal attacks several times in the course of one two-minute round. Developer Yuke's misses the mark with these two; neither the ogle factor of the queen's match nor the novelty of the street fights adds much to the package.

XX loves its panty and breast shots and loads its plate with them, especially during the wrestlers' introduction movies, all of which are variations on Something Jiggly This Way Comes. This can be forgiven considering in light of the game's vast improvements. What can't so easily be passed off are the spotty wrestler behaviors. Inexplicably, an A.I.-controlled combatant will stop to pose and taunt her opponent while she's five feet away and perfectly capable of interrupting the spectacle with a dropkick or running boot to the face. Other times, the Roses become superhuman machines, capable of blocking every strike and reversing every hold. It's thorny, to be sure, and the caveat remains: handle these roses with care. **play**



Handle these roses with care.

Rumble Roses XX

score 7.0

- + Beautiful; decent lineup of match types
- Bad wrestler A.I.; creepy

System(s)	Xbox, PlayStation 2	Publisher	Electronic Arts	Available	Now
Developer	Criterion Games	Online/Multi	No	ESRB Rating	M

Boom and gloom...

words Greg Orlando

The first-person shooter will send you, alone and underpowered, against reinforced machine gun emplacements. Two machine guns firing simultaneously and almost without pause will tear you to pieces in seconds. When your health fails and the bucket gets dutifully punted, Black will ignominiously kick you back to the last checkpoint—one you reached about 15 minutes ago.

Unrepentant and unforgiving, Black does not tolerate fools. A soldier and his life are soon parted, and the game's auto-save system ensures one thing: you will suffer for dying. In-game checkpoints are few and far between, and there seems to have been little thought put into their placement. Worse, the game does not

allow for saves in the middle of levels; shut the power off and a half-completed challenge must be started afresh. To its credit, Black allows for a difficulty shift upon a restart, but this seems a poor solution at best.

This is not Burnout with guns, as the game's developer Criterion had initially made Black out to be. Its firefights are manic, chaotic affairs, allowing for little time for thought and even less for breathing. Yet despite its frantic pace, Black demands planning, careful strategy, and patience the auto destruction-based Burnout eschews. It's more dense and less accessible, too, and an entirely new beast unto itself. Those expecting to run-and-gun through Black will be greeted with bullets, lots of them, and prompts to restart.

Shooters have oftentimes touted destructive environments as a selling point. Black revels in its breakaway walls, shattered glass, explosive machinery, and

combustible vehicles. It's a simple thrill to hurl a grenade through a window, listen to the dull plink of shattered glass as it crashes down, and watch the resultant explosion knock out any intact panes. Enemy snipers perching on platforms above fuel tanks can be blown up to great satisfaction, and huge chains of land mines can be coaxed into exploding one after another with a simple pistol shot. Stuff blows up real good in Black, and it's a slow level where fully 80 percent (give or take) of it doesn't end up smoking, smoldering, burnt, blown up, or horribly malformed.

The destructible environments are more than just a visual treat, with Black's developers taking the simple notion that weapons do as much damage to scenery as they do people and wholly integrating it into gameplay. Smoke and dust kicked up from explosions and pockmarked concrete obscure potential targets; Oftentimes it will be necessary to aim not for a body, but for a gun's muzzle flash. Shelter from a hail of bullets will often disintegrate, necessitating the need for a quick evacuation to a safer location, and the enemy's rate of fire—as well as its persistence and tendency to be well reinforced—demands you constantly be

"Its firefights are manic, chaotic affairs, allowing for little time for thought and even less for breathing."





"Black works well as a single-player adventure, despite its uneven patches, and certainly does its part to advance the genre of the console shooter."

Here comes the boom.



Hang Time

Shooting at an enemy on an overhanging catwalk in Black, and you might just knock send the bad guy sprawling over the railing and down to his death. Some foes, however, do not go gently into that good night, and will grab on to a ledge or pole, dangling for dear life. They'll eventually pull themselves up, too, unless they're shot.

its emphasis on collateral damage to the scenery, is bloodless and sanitized. Even shooting the enemies here seems rote and by-the-numbers, especially when you can hit a foe with a burst of fire, watch him recoil, then do it three or four more times before he croaks. As much as the developers got the mechanics of battle correct, they failed to capture a sense that this is a game where humans are running around shooting other humans.

The lack of online play for Black is notable, but not necessarily crippling. Black works well as a single-player adventure, despite its uneven patches, and certainly does its part to advance the genre of the console shooter. Its Tivliz asylum stage, wherein the protagonist must storm his way through a heavily fortified junkyard littered with plane wreckage and dominated by a series of metal walkways where enemies can pour both gun- and rocketfire down from above, is a fine piece of level design, perhaps one of first-person shooting's finest. And when the lights go out, Black still has the wherewithal to shine, albeit intermittently. **play**

Black

score **7.5**

+	Destructible environments; wonderful explosions.
-	No online play, enemies exhibit almost superhuman ability to resist bullets.

thinking of where to go next. Black may be harsh in its sentiment toward dying, but this is seemingly an extension of its philosophy on gunplay. These battles, they seem real; more to the point, they seem dangerous.

It's unfortunate, then, when some of the game's enemies are seemingly oblivious to their surroundings. It's possible to blow a door open with a shotgun blast, walk in to a room, and potshot a clueless enemy from behind. There's little need for the silencers that pop up in various missions, as sometimes enemies simply don't hear what they're supposed to hear or don't notice stuff that would tend to indicate something's gone awry: bullet holes, dead bodies, or wrecked objects.

Live-action sequences string the

game's missions together, and these are generally intriguing, if a bit poorly shot and abrupt. The game's protagonist, a special operative working for the U.S. government, has been imprisoned with the in-game missions told as flashbacks. The context is much appreciated, as Black's actual gameplay does nothing to tell a story. In-game chatter reflects the spirit of warfare, with barked commands and exclamations, but no plot elements are revealed during the missions themselves.

There's a disconnect, too, in terms of who's doing what and to whom. Black's foes are all masked and similar looking, and shooting them is sort of like plunking clay ducks on the midway. A game with this much killing should evoke some sort of emotional response, but Black, save for

State of Emergency 2

The revolution loses steam

System	PS2
Developer	DC Studios
Publisher	Southpeak Interactive

Online/Multi	None
Available	February
ESRB Rating	M

SOE wasn't broken so I'm not sure why Southpeak tried to "fix" it, rather than refine what was a flamboyant and wonderfully over the top exercise in heavily populated rampant mass destruction. The new militia for SOE2 is a surprisingly bland bunch, introduced sequentially as the game unfolds sending them on a series of missions to overthrow the totalitarian corporations lock on the city. Libra—now a crop haired special ops bot with zero allure—has been reduced to a tiny role in the game, playable within a few levels towards the end; Spanky's tattooed troll of a carcass has been streamlined and in the process diluted, and the other two miscreants are almost too dull to warrant description. The missions range from mundane to good; the visuals and overall production values are for the most part flat, and the AI isn't up to the task at hand even though the inspiration behind it—doling out commands on the

fly—is solid, if not passé. The control is good, but there's no jump or evasive maneuvers making SOE 2 an altogether innocuous, all too familiar assault.

Dave Halverson

score	5.5	+	Good control, descent shooting.
		-	Manic fun of the original is lost in translation.



beatmania

Play with yourself

System(s)	PlayStation 2
Developer	Konami
Publisher	Konami

Multi	1-2 Players
Available	March
ESRB Rating	E

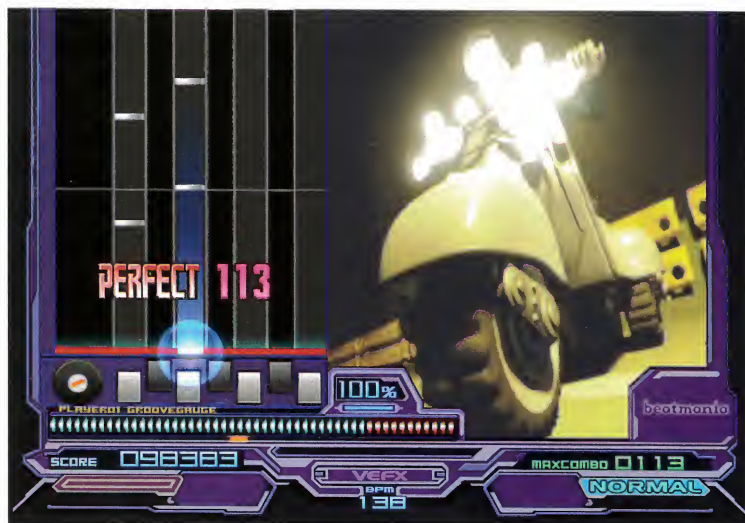
Before games like DDR or Guitar Hero were household names, there was beatmania—Konami's "virtual DJ" game where players used a mock turntable and piano-like keys to active notes in time to music. beatmania is finally making its way to the States, but unfortunately, this feels very much like a first attempt.

Longtime fans of the series will find this release a bit uninspired. The song selection is somewhat small compared to recent Japanese versions, and beyond the handful of U.S.-exclusive tracks, there's not much new here. Then there's the menu and game interface, which is boring and rather ugly compared to 9th Style, upon which it was based.

The U.S. version of beatmania isn't bad by any means; the game is still loads of fun, we get the improved new style home controller, and the in-game movies don't



The special effects hit strong and often.



have the playback issue many Japanese versions have had. For people new to the game, or those with only arcade experience, this will be a great home version. I just wish, after the long wait, beatmania had received the debut on our shores that it deserved. **Eric Patterson**

score	7.5	+	Great new controller.
		-	Play list is lacking.



Drakengard 2

score 4.5

System(s)	PlayStation 2	Online/Multi	NA
Developer	Cavia/Square Enix	Available	February
Publisher	Ubisoft	ESRB Rating	M

Drakengard 2 picks up where its predecessor left off, warts and all. This edition of Dragonheart: The Japanese Years, comes filled with lots of air-to-air, air-to-ground, and ground-based combat, but never manages to achieve that fabled adjective "interesting." Gameplay consists of bland hackfests demanding little in the way of actual skill and much in the way of button-mashing. **GO**

Driver Parallel Lines

score 8.0

System(s)	PS2	Online/Multi	NA
Developer	Reflections	Available	March
Publisher	Atari	ESRB Rating	M

Driver: Parallel Lines is a slice of the '70s done right. Reflections has wisely scaled the on-foot-to-driving ratio way back, refocusing their efforts where they worked best, on the pursuits and driving ops, while adding difficulty determined by the flow of traffic—a great idea. The result is the sequel we've been waiting for since 1999...that smells like 1979. **DH**



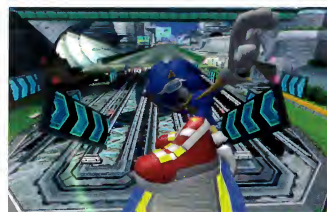
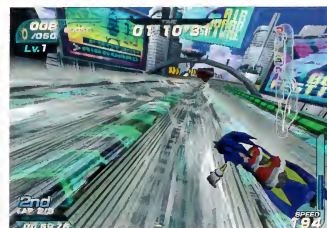
Sonic Riders

score 7.0

System(s)	PS2, GC, Xbox	Multi	1-4 player
Developer	Sonic Team	Available	February
Publisher	Sega	ESRB Rating	E

If you're looking for a one-of-a-kind racing experience, blue should be your new favorite color. Not that Sonic Riders is everything I'd hoped for, but if nothing else, it's different. Imagine a racing action rollercoaster infused with that unmistakable Sonic groove and you're at least half way home...but don't come looking for traditional Wipeout-style gameplay. SR is packed

with mostly quirky nuances that take time (and a little frustration) to master, often resulting in races being determined by track memorization as much as mastery of your particular racer's strengths and weaknesses as they pertain to each wild ride. **DH**



Mark Ecko's Getting Up: CUP

score 6.0

System(s)	PS2, Xbox	Online/Multi	NA
Developer	The Collective	Available	February
Publisher	Atari	ESRB Rating	M

Neither slick as Jet Set Radio, as nimble as Tomb Raider, or as up for a fight as your average beat 'em up; the sum of GU's flawed parts make for a heavy handed, inconsistent whole: A new strain of game where unlocking iPod tunes is on par with unlocking precision and fun. It has its moments but it's a bit buggy and surprisingly flat in the paint dept. **DH**



Final Fight Streetwise

score 4.0

System(s)	PS2, Xbox	Online/Multi	NA
Developer	Capcom	Available	February
Publisher	Capcom	ESRB Rating	M

Exasperating mini-games; bad AI, camera jams, and a slap in the face story to any fan... This is not good...no—this is really not good. No more US versions of renowned franchises, Capcom, we beg you. I can't bear to see these characters and homages in this depressing a light, and did you have to drag Cammy into it? **DH**



My DICE Diary

words Brady Fiechter

DAY 1

Arrival

It's my first time at DICE, which stands for: design, innovate, communicate, entertain. It's basically a gathering of all the top talent in games, who descend on Las Vegas for three days of alcoholism, seminars, keynote speeches, and—the best part—schmoozing.

There's a golf tournament today. I love golf, but I'm hungover from the night before, where I marvel, as usual, at stories of Japanese developers on just how brutal the development schedules can be over there: people sleep under desks, get paid crap, same old industry story that never gets old. I say, at least know the most artistically inspired games come out of Japan, so carry on... Very good of me to buy their last game used.

Some fellow journalists and friends attempt to coerce me into the first annual celebrity poker tournament. I'm not dumb, don't need to instantly lose the entry fee of 200 dollars, so I decline. Dr. Raymond Muzyka, Co-CEO of BioWare, is not dumb, and takes it all for a cool \$4,315.00. That's enough for, like, at least two nights out at Sapphire in the VIP room.

I'm very pleased to have saved my 200 bucks in order to cover the bet I make with this flamboyant designer, who insists the PS3 will be outsold the first year of sales by the Xbox 360.

My laughter resonates to such a shrill degree, I am expecting his wine glass to shatter. Arguing ensues, temperatures rise. Fortunately, we both agree that the Xbox 360 is full of potential and holds many surprises to come; we both agree Gears of War is either gonna shatter the foundation of gaming as we know it, or just be really good and at least move systems. That is, if there are finally systems available to move. We both agree the whole shortage-whining thing is no big deal and part as good friends.

A meet and greet's going down at the lovely Green Valley Ranch, where most the DICE attendees are staying. The usual rented T&A parades around, trying very hard to deal with the cold. I see a copy of Kameo lying on the ground, suggesting someone pick it up and sell it back to Gamestop. "They'll give you 7 dollars," I say.

You'd think I had just asked the guy beside me if I could sleep with his wife, because various curse words ensued as

"... we both agree that the Xbox 360 is full of potential and holds many surprises to come."

his face reddened. We talk about how sad it is that a) someone would pay 60 dollars for a game and turn around and sell it back for a pittance b) the used market is so dangerous for the industry c) shops can actually get away with buying these games back so cheaply and selling them at barely discounted prices. "Most gamers have problems," I say. They leave Psychonauts and Oddworld on the shelves while the 50 Cent game sells big. Everyone nods and shoves their fists into the sky in defiance; the consensus is we will all return to our jobs the next week and nothing will change.

DAY 2

Talks

Today is the first day of seminars, where guys like Peter Moore and Will Right talk business. This isn't a place to candy-coat the press or consumers; it's all shop. Thank god there's not a single game machine or PR machine in sight. The learning happens behind the scenes, and for once in a pathetically rare instance, real discussions about real issues seem ready to explode. E3 is a waste compared to this.

I'm late to lunch with Nintendo and Reggie Fils-Aime, who beams when the discussion of the almost-here Mario Bros. DS comes up. He says he's not bs'ing

DICE

design, innovate, communicate, entertain



From top: Jay Mohr, smiling in anticipation of his DICE gig. David Jaffe, contemplating his aggressive speech. Fumito Ueda, contemplating his next masterwork.

when he proclaims the game a rare gem. I believe him, because if there's ever an industry immune to bs, it's this one. The more he explains—having original team members is obviously a good thing—the more I want the game immediately. The discussions continue down some interesting paths. He wants to know what we think of a sturdy approach to selling the game to those youngsters who might prove a tough audience. I prepare to respond with: "give Peach some cleavage and Mario an Ak-47 for the cover art and sales will rock." I hold back; it only reminds me how sad the state of



the industry might really be—there sure has been a lot of complaining going on around here—and the world that spins it, can be. Kids don't want joy and fantasy in their lives so much anymore. What... you think GTA's a success because adult gamers recognize its brilliance? I tell my friend across from me the age old: we're a nation who loves to consume garbage in the cheapest, easiest way possible, growing our pathetic lives into an obese state of numbness. He says I need to shut up, this coming from a guy who loves Killer 7.

David Jaffe's about to go on stage and discuss the making of God of War. This is the talk many are most curious about. Jaffe has become one of the more outspoken developers in an industry where few people have much to say. He touches on subjects he's debated a few times before, like the need for more outside talent to take the industry to the next level and the sorry state of financial reward most developers must come to grips with. He's absolutely correct; all hail unionization! Nearing the end of his speech, he takes a humorous jab at journalists, asking the press to challenge the development community more. On the way out of the auditorium, I tell him, why don't you start challenging us more too?

The day's over, and it's off to grab a taxi back to Hard Rock Hotel, where the 9th Annual Interactive Achievement Awards is about to begin. This is the moment where honors are handed out across every category imaginable.

I wait for a taxi. I continue to wait, later hearing that there were snipers downtown, forcing the police to close off a square mile or something like that. Rumor was they had received training playing Halo 2. I think the truth in the end was that all the delays came down to a wrecked car somewhere.

Still waiting, and I overhear a group of people debating exactly how much money a game director should make. They think Jaffe is too vocal and expecting too much. Ok, so from now on, let's stick to development schedules where the workers toil for 14 hour days, 7 days a week, for months at a time? Awesome. Then we can continue to have matured talent replaced by 20-somethings willing to take the abuse for the love of the game.

I share a taxi with a television producer, who's interested in finding ways of getting game content on the air in new ways. I give him some advice: make programming that doesn't suck. He thinks I might be onto something. Someone next to me comments that gamemaking simply isn't glamorous, and trying to base shows around the goings on in the trenches will never amount to much. We all agree the industry is just so young still, and everything will fall into place once the

"What we need is to embrace the language of games..."

growing pains give way to a truly adult playground.

Maybe it is all just like porn, as Jaffe questioned in an analogy in his speech. When I get to the pre-party, I bring this up to the guy sitting next to me, who was adamant in support of applying rich story to games. Key word: rich. And purposeful. If I'm to interpret what Jaffe asked: are we working with a medium that has no need for narrative in the filmic sense, and simply needs to stick to the juicy stuff? What we need is to embrace the language of games, which is where some developers are failing right now. I want story in games. But what we get now is indeed the equivalent of porn stars supplying the acting and porn directors trying to bring life to the action. There are specific beats that relate to the game environment, certain editing techniques that aren't being employed. The enjoyment of games is suffering because of all this push to be filmmakers.

Comedian Jay Mohr, the host of the evening, heads on stage. He looks annoyed. Why is the place half empty, and why is there no one sitting in the VIP section? He starts to rip into the crowd, slowly loosening up the automaton contingency as the place slowly begins to fill. His shtick is freaking hilarious, as he plays off the awkward quirks of gaming and the crowd. He pokes fun at people's clothing and disposition, finds the vulnerable spots and undeniable eccentricities that mark the industry and this evening of awards. He hits a homerun.

So do the God of War guys, winning 7 awards, including overall game of the year and best animation and art direction. Guitar Hero picks up five, including best family game. The joke on stage: did anyone actually listen to the lyrics? Bah: who needs refined standards.

Afterwards, some comment on how they are offended by Mohr. A developer I'm walking out with admits: maybe we shouldn't create an environment that's such an easy target.

I hope the academy next year could find it a necessity to actually supply the list of awards with names of the talent who created the games. Here we are, as usual, crediting the names of companies instead of the talent involved in bringing the fine achievements that do exist into our living rooms. I ask someone what they think about this: "It's not about the ego," he replies. Well, it is about demanding a little respect.

DAY 3

More talks, more interesting conversations



Today was a great surprise! It so happens that Fumito Ueda and Kenji Kaido, creators of Shadow of the Colossus, are at the conference. My appreciation for this game has only climbed over time, as it did with ICO before it; it's the most resonant, purely emotional experience I've had in a game, and I now had a chance to speak with the makers in person. I bring up the recent comments by Shigeru Miyamoto and Hideo Kojima that games are not art. "Games are indeed not art," agrees Ueda. I'm sorry to hear his casual response to my prying that they could indeed be one day: "They are a product, made in calculation."

We speak of the spiritual qualities to Shadow, the difficulties in dealing with the PS2 hardware. One thing he would do differently on his next project? "Not take so much time!" I won't argue that.

I head to the Into the Pixel exhibit, where game art is on display for purchase by the highest bidder. Seven thousand dollars was raised for the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences and the Prints and Drawings Council at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. There are some interesting works on display, but some of the better work I've seen in the past year is absent.

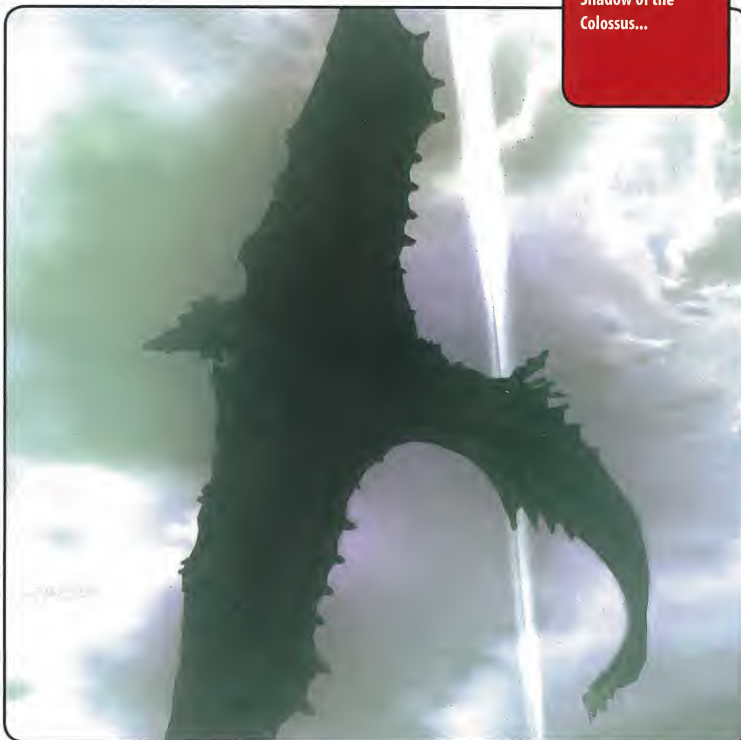
It's time for a late lunch. Unfortunately, a lack of energy seems to stifle impassioned debate amongst the quiet throng of developers, which prompts me to turn to my PSP for a round of Lumines.

A passerby notices me, asks me why I'm still caught up in such an old game. Easy: it's all I would care to play right now in my free time for the system. And I forgot my DS and Mario Kart, so... We talk of the system's weak status for the time being, and the growing disappointment many people feel. I complain that I forgot the button configuration fatiguing and awkward, wishing for an eventual redesign of some sort. But the excitement felt that first time you hold the PSP should never be forgotten, I say, because it's still roiling inside that striking little box, waiting to be unleashed by the proper minds.

Ending the conference is the final discussion... "Outside the Shadows: A Conversation with the Creators of Ico and Shadow of the Colossus." They speak of respect for Half-Life 2, and the struggle and immense challenge of creating a game like Shadow of the Colossus. They talk of the hours and perfectionism, of routinely spending nights in the office, and how, in ICO, the character was given horns so you could see him better in the environment. Kaido, who was producer, recalls how Ueda created the demo video for ICO over a four month period, on a PC, and how impressed he was with what he saw. When ICO finally went into full production, a scant 20 people worked to help bring Ueda's vision to life. For Shadow of the Colossus, they added 10 more, of which Ueda admits only a couple were up to his exacting standards.

With that, DICE concludes. **play**

The majesty of Shadow of the Colossus...



System(s)	PSP	Publisher	Capcom
Developer	Capcom	Available	August

Ultimate Ghosts 'n Goblins

Sir Arthur makes his return

words Brady Fiechter

Handhelds are becoming the messiah for old-school disciples incessantly harping about the death of 2D and their beloved classic video game series. Goblins fans, Capcom has received your prayers, delivering a reverentially modern take on the classic side-scrolling games that ended years ago on SNES. "Originally we were thinking about coming out with some sort of new Ghosts 'n Goblins game," says Ultimate Ghosts 'n Goblins producer Hironobu Takeshita. "So once we were able to get the original director on board, we decided rather than remaking the old ones we'd go for a brand new title."

"Brand new" isn't always such a good thing, but when you see Ultimate Ghosts 'n Goblins moving on the scintillating PSP widescreen, new is very, very good indeed. An immediate feeling of nostalgia sets in, with the return of Sir Arthur moving familiarly through a lush graveyard scene, buoyed by remixed music. He carries a shield and wields magic, throwing his

spears with the same feel for aiming scheme fans will remember from before, augmented with vertical attacks as well. Arthur's jumping movement has also paid attention to tradition, maintaining that same narrow arc that requires technique as much as reflex. A double jump and dash are now in the mix for added flexibility, and you can even clasp the edges of platforms for a little extra forgiveness.

Not that the game is a breeze—at least on initial play in its current form. This series was never easy on the casual gamer, and Takeshita admits they're still tweaking: "For the balancing of the actual gameplay, that's something we are still working hard to get down right. For example, we made a demo ROM for TGS, and we thought by today's standards we would be really hard, but a nonjapanese press person played it and said he blew right through it. So we're really working hard to get that fine-tuned balance down."

Whether the five main stages are viciously hard or more progressively



Every knight must face boiling lava.





"A double jump and dash are now in the mix for added flexibility, and you can even clasp the edges of platforms for a little extra forgiveness."

forgiving, replay and less linear exploration is the big focus. Once an area is defeated, you can go back through before finishing the entire adventure, finding new items and new paths to find. "You can play for an hour, a minute, however long you want. It's a lot like the arcade," says Takeshita. "You might put in a quarter and play for 10 minutes, or you might put in a bunch of quarters and play for an hour. So it was really a good match between the PSP and the arcade-style gameplay of the game."

The robust item management in Ultimate Ghosts 'n Goblins is probably one of the more apparent and welcome additions to the faithful gameplay. Arthur

begins his search for the princess—once a one-track hero, always a one-track hero—pretty bare bones, but as he discovers a growing stash of items, the missions become increasingly satisfying. Powerups, armor and shields all possess varying degrees of attributes, and Arthur grows with experience.

The game I played was "15 percent" there, but that sliver was enough to build the opinion that Capcom is on a fantastic path toward pleasing the truest fans of the Ghosts 'n Goblins series. Consider yourself lucky that Arthur's returned: "Originally, the first three games, we sort of thought of them as a trilogy. And then kind of wrapped those up and decided not to carry the series any further," says Takeshita. "But now thinking of new projects we could do, with everything being full 3D, we thought it'd be a cool challenge in a cool way to get in new fans to go back to the oldschool 2D side scrolling and really do something great with that." **play**





preview

System(s)	PSP	Publisher	NIS America
Developer	Hit Maker/SCEJ	Available	July

Blade Dancer Lineage of Light

Let there be light...

words Greg Orlando

No one should question Blade Dancer's lineage. The PSP game was crafted as a collaborative effort between Sony Computer Entertainment Japan and former Sega studio Hit Maker.

The game looks and plays in the manner of Final Fantasy, with turn-based battles, epic heroes, screen-cleansing spells, and a storyline built around the notion that something bad is threatening someplace good. Enter a hero who, if he doesn't act, will allow an evil prophecy to be fulfilled and Light's skeleton is thusly fleshed out. Players take the role of Lance as he's pitted against a demon lord, and can expect to find allies in, among others, a monk and an elf. As he travels, Lance can have three other members in his adventuring party.

During exploration, Lance will be the only hero shown on screen. There are no random battles to be had here; monsters are shown wandering the game worlds and can be avoided. In turn, the monsters will be able to spot an approaching party and react accordingly. If a party seems too powerful, the monsters may opt to flee a possible encounter.

Combat sees the game shift into a separate battle screen. Load times have traditionally been problematic for the PSP, and it would likely spell death for this RPG to load excessively every time a fight occurred. Light featured no such excessive load times and, in fact, shifted gears quickly.

After lining up the heroes on the bottom of the screen, the sword-swinging begins in earnest. An exclamation point near a character's attack menu serves as an

indication of his battle readiness, and once it appears, a hero can strike. A special "Luna meter" fills as combat progresses, and this serves as a pool from which magic spells can be cast. Both the game's heroes and its enemies share this pool, however, and either side can tap into it at will. This makes magic use an interesting affair, and the goal here is certainly do unto others before they do unto you.

Weapons will crack and break during gameplay. To replenish their stock, heroes will need to acquire certain ingredients to craft new ones. Defeated monsters will drop materials that can then be experimented with, and used to create swords, spears, and other death-dealing implements. The trick is finding the right recipe and the right mixture; special blacksmith shops will be able to aid with the process so once the right formula is found, it can be reproduced at will provided the materials are there. The developers claim approximately 600 different weapons can be created here.

Other special weapons can be found in

the course of Light's cooperative four-player ad-hoc online play. Once an item is found in multiplayer, it can be taken back to the single-player story mode and replicated accordingly. **play**

"The game looks and plays in the manner of Final Fantasy..."



Turn-based
battles go
mobile & online.



Resident Evil: Deadly Silence

score 8.0

System	Nintendo DS	Online/Multi	1-4
Developer	Capcom	Available	February
Publisher	Capcom	ESRB Rating	M



Resident Evil: Deadly Silence is not out to increase the Resident Evil fanbase. It's the original PlayStation classic in most every way that counts, and that means glory to fans, pain to the detractors. A quick 180 degree turn, first-person knife battles, slightly better item management and a few new puzzles are some of the more significant additions to the original Resident Evil universe, but this does little to give the game a substantial boost.

The campy flavorings and leaden character control would find most newbies questioning how the game first garnered such a cult following, which is at once understandable and unfortunate. There's still a lot to respect and cherish about Resident Evil, once you're able to come to grips with its antiquated qualities. The unique mansion set piece and



sense of isolated dread that comes across even within the more basic visual presentation still show just how special the original vision was. It's fun to relive the experience we had years ago on a tiny handheld, and given the nature of the DS, you can forgive more of the rougher edges. The multiplayer mode is as fun as you might expect,

but nothing worth the price of admission, and the Rebirth section is more of an obligation than an effective enhancement to the original foundation. This series has been revisited time and time again, and here it is again.

Brady Fiechter

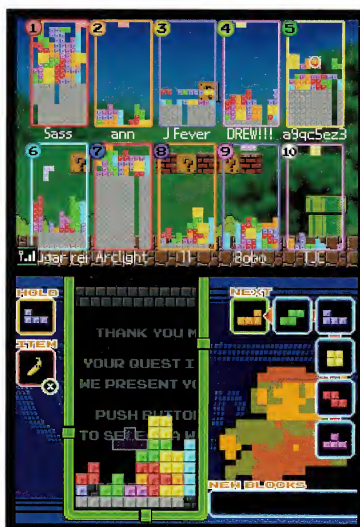
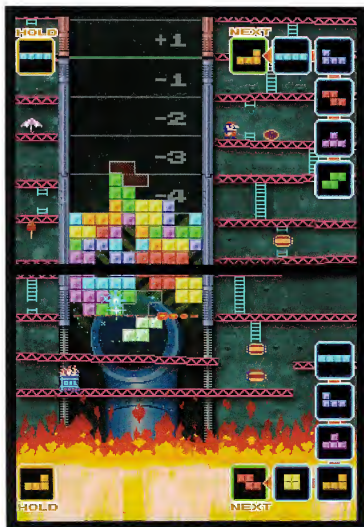
Tetris DS

score 9.0

System	Nintendo DS	Online/Multi	10 Player + Online
Developer	Nintendo	Available	April
Publisher	Nintendo	ESRB Rating	E

Back before Nintendogs, Animal Crossing, or Brain Training were selling millions of copies and getting people hooked on Nintendo portable gaming goodness, a simple game known as Tetris was the digital-

crack-in-handheld-form of choice. Tetris is back, this time revived for the beloved Nintendo DS. While they could easily have made a straightforward Tetris port for the system, Nintendo instead chose to really go all out for this one,



especially in building up the one-player portion of the game. Classic mode is there, of course, but wrapped in NES nostalgia, with characters like Mario and Link reliving their 8-bit lives on the upper screen as you play. From there, you can satisfy objectives in Mission mode, work your brain solving Yoshi's 200 puzzles or the challenges of Touch mode, catch falling blocks in the Metroid-themed Catch mode, or battle head-to-head trying to force your opponent to the bottom of the screen in Push mode, the game's true shining star. Combine that with up to ten-player multiplayer off of one cartridge, and the end result is the best version of Tetris that's been released on any console. **Eric Patterson**

Oh yes, that is indeed Samus.



System(s) PSP
Developer Konami

Publisher Konami
Online/Multi NA

Available March
ESRB Rating M

2

Metal Gear AC!D

Now in Snakovision!

words Casey Loe

For true gamers who don't care about "hot coffee" and anti-Haitian slurs, Metal Gear Acid may have been the most controversial game of 2005. Those who were expecting a traditional Metal Gear title were appalled by the turn-based, card-driven play mechanics, while those who were dreading the typical card-based spin-off crap were pleasantly surprised by how true to Metal Gear it really was. Whatever your experience with Metal Gear Acid, prepare to repeat it—this competent but unambitious sequel doesn't stray far from its source.

The refinements are subtle but generally welcome. You now control your own character while moving, and actions like crawling, punching, and hugging walls are mapped to buttons instead of being buried in menus. Many of the new cards

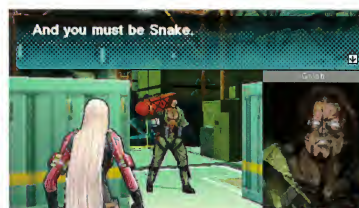
"While the mechanics have changed only slightly, the game's look has been given a drastic overhaul."

feel redundant, but they give plenty of options to players who want to make narrowly focused decks. New link cards, which trigger automatically when certain conditions are met, add a slight wrinkle to deck-building strategy, as does the ability to spend your points to enhance cards instead of buying new ones.

While the mechanics have changed only slightly, the game's look has been given a drastic overhaul. The characters have been remodeled with comic book flair, and the environments are surreally bright, as if the enemy compound had been painted with surplus highlighters. The new style even bleeds into the game's story; not only is it told in hand-drawn panels, but it is rife with preposterous comic book logic that is far removed from the gritty realism and grim philosophizing of past Metal Gear titles.



The game's new look paints a brighter than usual picture.



In addition to the standard story mode, you get a handful of neat bonuses, such as a wi-fi deathmatch mode and an arena where you can challenge classic bosses from the Metal Gear Solid series. But the most striking new feature is the option to play in 3D with the packed-in Solid Eye attachment that transforms your PSP into a next generation Virtual Boy (in a good way). The effect is fantastic, but it feels a little out of place in a strategy game—watching your cards float in space is undeniably cool, but has no effect on the gameplay experience. One gets the feeling that the Solid Eye was intended to be a mandatory fixture for some sort of 3D shooting game, but killed by cowardly lawyers who envisioned a spate of lawsuits as hardcore players went blind, walked

into buses, and caught ocular gonorrhea from their friends.

The Solid Eye is a gimmick, but this game sorely needs it. The refinements are welcome, but they won't be of much interest to the majority of players who didn't fall in love with the card system the first time around. Once again, MGA2 skillfully recreates some of the Metal Gear experience, but there's no point at which you wouldn't rather be playing the exact same game in real time, with full control over your character and real items in your inventory. Instead of making a sequel that justifies the switch to turn-based strategy (by putting you in charge of a squad of characters, for example), the developers have repeated the same strange experiment with the same mixed results. **play**

Metal Gear AC!D 2

score 6.5

- + It's in 3D! 3-fricking-D, man!
- It's basically the same game.



System(s) PSP
Developer Ready At Dawn

Publisher SCEA
Online/Multi 2-player Bug Combat

Available March
ESRB Rating E



DAXTER

Jak who?

words Dave Halverson

In all honesty, as I wandered down the rows of PSPs on display at last year's E3 and saw the word "Daxter" on a marquee, my first thought—after "why?"—was of how much it didn't matter since I would never play it. That was last May. Fast-forward 8 months and there I was sliding the sample UMD into my PSP out of morbid curiosity before assigning it to anyone other than me...And I've been glued to it ever since. See—I disliked Daxter (to put it mildly) throughout the entire Jak and Daxter series. The last thing I needed with my deliciously derelict, yellow-haired, manga-style hero was a belligerent rodent who served as little more than a drain on my platforming epic (imagine my surprise at the conclusion of the series). Now all of a sudden I can't get enough of him. Jak who? Whatever magic potion they've been drinking at Naughty Dog, when a pack broke off to join forces with what Blizzard blew in to form Ready At Dawn, they snuck some in their satchel and passed it around like a bottle of Thunderbird.

It didn't take much deliberation to discover my hidden penchant for irritating orange ocelots...It was simply an issue of miscasting. Daxter makes a much better lead than he ever did a sidekick. As a lead critter he's everything I look for and then some, complete with an agile double-jump, sticky fingers, wicked boost and hover skills, the need for speed, and a deep appreciation for the female form...outside of his species (you don't often find that in a talking rodent)—a combination I find most enjoyable. It doesn't hurt that RAD undoubtedly consist of a tight-knit clan of platforming junkies either. After they finished injecting the gamut of platforming devices into Daxter they kept right on going. Beyond bouncing on rickety platforms, navigating through giant rotating pipes, Klonoa-style extreme aeriels, double-jumping, grappling, and a steady stream of ingenious bouts of boost and hover, Daxter performs a wealth of extermination maneuvers via his ever-handy back canister, dons an electric

"Daxter makes a much better lead than he ever did a sidekick. As a lead critter he's everything I look for and then some..."

spatula for spanking bugs, discharges toxic mist from the back of a hover bike, and motors around on a sweet hovering Vespa. All this and "cute" is nowhere on the menu. The adversaries in Daxter are wonderfully dark and sinister, the bosses mean business, and the underlying theme of Jak's imprisonment (which actually surfaces in the game) keeps the fabric of the series taught. It's like Jak II sans Jak with a chewy platforming core. It's also far and away the best looking 3D game on the PSP. Whatever's in that magic potion I hope they copied the recipe. **play**

Daxter

score **9.0**

- + A platforming addict's dream. Huge environments, loads of great play mechanics and the best graphics on PSP.
- Tiny little bouts of slow-down in massive areas that have zero effect on gameplay.



Console killer:
Epic platforming has a new
address. More please!



Generation of Chaos

score **7.0**

System	PSP	Online/Multi	No
Developer	Idea Factory	Available	Now
Publisher	NIS	ESRB Rating	E

Generation of Chaos packs a very big war into a teeny, tiny package. And despite its ultra-cute, rabbit-eared shopkeepers and diminutive combatants, the game is truly more than a saccharine-laced strategy RPG.

Get past the obligatory talking heads who yammer on, and there's a lot of strategy to be had. The game takes place in two phases, with the first involving character movement and empire manipulation played out on an isometric board and the second involving real-time combat between opposing 30-man forces. The game does an excellent job of providing differing melee- and projectile-based troop types, and there is the obligatory wealth of stuff to buy to flesh out the game's generals.



Idea Factory puts most of the game's good stuff in the strategy portion. Here, players can improve their territories by altering their kingdom's terrain, purchase items, increase the loyalty of their subjects, play at politics, and scout out the enemy. The battles themselves, fought when opposing armies touch the same square, are anticlimactic, and feature minimal player input save to select spells, skills, and issue basic commands. For the most part, players become spectators in their own war, forced to play only the tiniest of roles in the successes and defeats of their armies. **Greg Orlando**



Idea Factory again produces wonderful character designs.

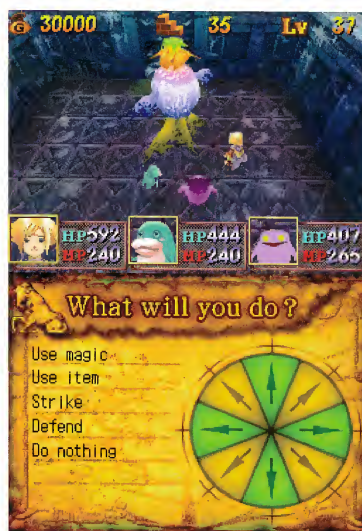
Tao's Adventure: Curse of the Demon Seal

score **5.5**

System	Nintendo DS	Online/Multi	NA
Developer	Konami	Available	March
Publisher	Konami	ESRB Rating	E

Like shooters, fighting games, FPSs and so on, the gaming industry can't get enough (or copy enough) of a good thing, which has always been fine by me, as long as it's done well. Such is not the case in Tao's Adventure, the latest action-RPG that has you drawing spell shapes via

stylus to cast various forms of magic. The problem here is in the delivery. Rather than have you follow a basic pattern, Tao's requires you to memorize spells, else consult the spell book, causing the first disconnect—the second of which comes by way of the inability to move in the game while the



map below is displayed. Also to note: The DS is the wrong place for tiny polygonal graphics. The writing and story are also all overly worn and too childish to hold interest and the limited save points and cumbersome nature of the monster tower a further drain on the brain. Tao's is a decent kids' action/RPG but with so much greatness on DS, even that's a stretch. **Dave Halverson**



Tao's would have been a better adventure hand drawn.



Untold Legends: The Warriors Code

score 7.5

System	PSP	Online/Multi	2 player co-op
Developer	Sony Online Entertainment	Available	March
Publisher	Sony Online Entertainment	ESRB Rating	T



All hail the top-down dungeon crawl RPG in all of its simplistic yet sophisticated glory... or not. Even though they've refined the graphics and gameplay to the tee, I still always feel as if SOE is tapping me on the shoulder and uttering "had enough yet?" every time I begin one of their fine adventures anew. So how is it they keep hooking me? While there is much new to celebrate weaved into Untold, it doesn't have that dramatic an effect on the actual fabric of the game, yet I find myself glued nonetheless. I must be stricken with the Dynasty Warriors strain.

No; I know what it is. What I like most about Untold, aside from the wonderfully streamlined refinements to the engine, is among the simplest of tweaks called camera height interpolation... a.k.a. the ability to place the camera as close or as far as I desire to these gorgeous new character designs. Zooming on the fly (by holding L and pressing up or down) allows you to pan out when necessary (fighting the game's massive bosses for instance) along with the ability to enjoy the best character designs SOE has come up with yet by parking the camera exactly where you want it. I'd still kill for a lock-on or strafe but one out of two isn't bad—especially given the quality of the acting and story arcs Untold has on tap. By Zeus they've done it again! **Dave Halverson**



Charge attacks trigger a powerful lunge.

Super Princess Peach

score 8.5

System	Nintendo DS	Online/Multi	None
Developer	Nintendo	Available	March
Publisher	Nintendo	ESRB Rating	E

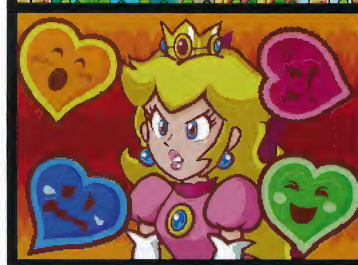
Far from abandoning 2D, one could say Nintendo has actually been re-invigorating it, showing that there is still plenty of life left in this once flourishing style. Granted, only Nintendo and a handful of other developers can make 2D games at this very high level. Nevertheless,

here it is for everyone to enjoy.

Super Princess Peach is literally overflowing with gameplay, and while there's nothing hugely original here, the combination of elements is wonderful. And I appreciate the way Nintendo integrates so many different play



It's Peach's turn to rescue Mario.



mechanics into one character and concept, as opposed to what I consider to be lazier efforts with multiple characters.

The game makes minor but effective use of the touch screen, most frequently when selecting one of Peach's four "moods" which can briefly give her some new abilities. There are also mini-games between rounds and surprising moments that I won't spoil for you here.

So, take some of the best ideas from Mario and Kirby and throw in a lot of fun item collection and fantastic attention to detail and you have Super Princess Peach. Between this and the forthcoming New Super Mario Bros., I may not have to get that regression therapy... **Michael Hobbs**



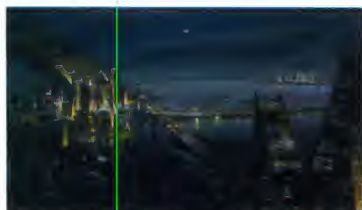
System(s)	PC	Publisher	NCsoft
Developer	Team Beam	Available	TBA

Exteel

Online heavy metal concert

Preview

words Mike Griffin



Wartorn future and robots with big guns? Check.



Are western gamers ready for a competitive online action game with customizable mechs, persistent character stats, and Woo-style gunfights and martial arts combos? Exteel is that game, and though it remains locked away in Korea, NCsoft is now considering options for an international release. Exteel is not your typical NCsoft title. That is to say, this is not a MMORPG. In development at NCsoft's Team Beam, a special projects division of Team E&G (Lineage 2), Exteel is all out player vs. player skill-based blasting. While the

MMO formula lends a few popular ingredients to Exteel's design, such as persistent stats and skill trees, the game also tips its hat to the console world with a simplified interface and lock-on system. All this action takes place across the colonies of a lost planet in a war-torn sci-fi universe.

The Exteel team has analyzed similar games—such as SOE's PlanetSide—and they feel they've trimmed the extraneous elements and adopted a more robust server structure for the kind of accuracy that Exteel's ranged and melee attacks call for. The game uses a heavily modified Unreal 2 engine, and while this venerable code is showing its age in some games, it's one of the most capable multiplayer engines ever conceived and that's precisely what Team Beam needed for Exteel. Even in 2006, this engine is no dud when it comes to rendering environments. The team is currently in the process of creating maps for the planet's surface, such as naval sea outposts, a huge base erected above a volcanic region, glacial areas and gigantic battleships. After this they'll tackle space-based maps like sprawling



"...from pixie-like high-speed ninja bots geared for wicked melee to plodding armor-laden Siege behemoths..."

orbital stations. The goal for the art team is pretty straightforward: vivid sci-fi designs that support high-speed gameplay.

Exteel players will start out as Settlers and gradually increase their rank to Mercenary, Elite Mercenary, Soldier and so forth. You can modify your mech's base appearance, but everyone is issued the same selection of starting gear and all players begin with the same stats. In order to purchase higher quality equipment, players will have to develop their character (upgrading their levels and skills) in combat zones. Though primarily third-person, Exteel's combat movement is similar to FPS games, embracing WASD, mouselook and traditional reticule aiming. The reticule changes shape based on weapon type and quality. Exaggerated and stylish Skill attacks can be dialed into fighting game-inspired combos to devastating effect, but these require Skill Points to activate and extreme accuracy to pull off. Exteel places as much emphasis on melee attacks at its ranged attacks, and its weapons are classified as such: Melee, Semi-Ranged, Ranged and for fans of slow-moving ultra-firepower, there's Siege. Players can purchase and accumulate different weapon kits for the right and left hand, so how you decide to deliver death is entirely dependent on your play style or the type of map you're hunting on.

Customization in Exteel is certainly not limited to weapon load-out. These mechs are defined by the various armored parts used in their assembly. A robot can be created for speed or perhaps as a defensive character, or even a healer. Strictly speaking, upgrading does not occur through enhancing your existing parts, but rather through the replacement of parts. Your robot features a combination of five body pieces: Head, Core (a.k.a. torso), Arms, Legs and Backpack. With the exception of a few pieces of special equipment, all parts in the game can be customized. Leg upgrades will naturally affect stuff like running speed or jumping distances and the backpack can provide numerous enhancements including rocket booster charges. Every piece of

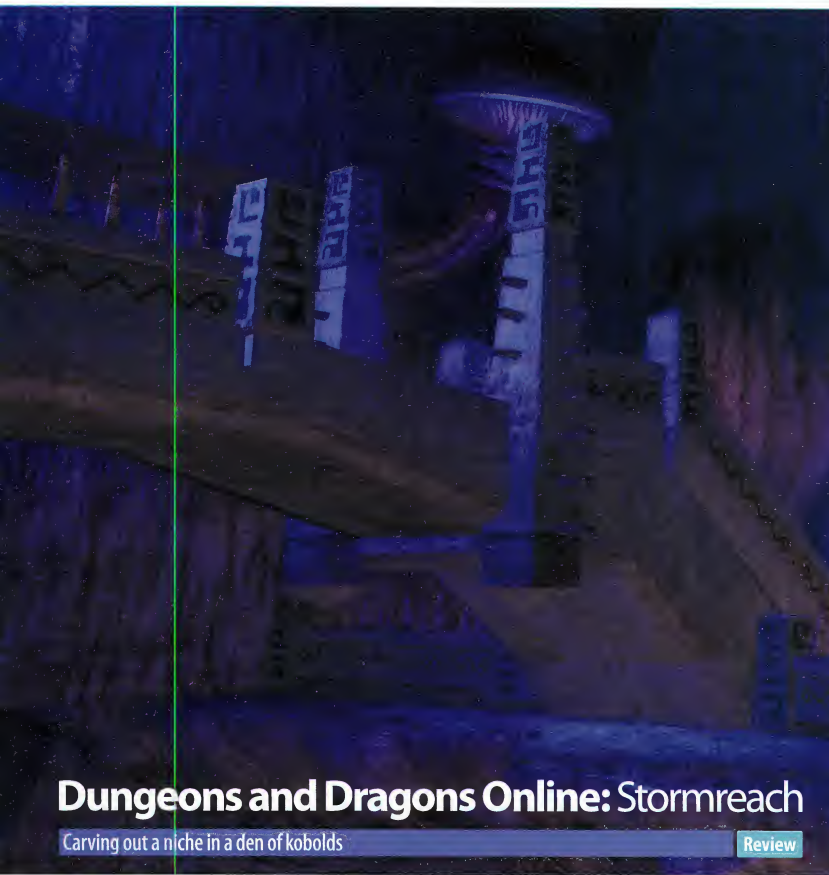
gear you choose to equip comes with a weight consideration that can alter movement parameters and your dash, side-dash and jumping could also be affected. Exteel's gameplay supports all configurations, from pixie-like high-speed ninja bots geared for wicked melee to plodding armor-laden Siege behemoths laying down crushing remote fire.

Exteel's title theme is composed in a modern orchestral style designed to evoke tension and suspense. When you enter the combat zones it's all about electronic melodies, electric guitar and heavy bass—all linked to the overdrive of action. Famed game composer Inon Zur and Team Beam's sound producers had to effectively balance the score and a tremendous volume of weapon, impact and explosion sounds. Weapon sounds were especially challenging, as Exteel blends futuristic sci-fi weaponry with modern mechanical weapons and swords. Some swords are 100% metal while others are energy-based. The key to executing Exteel's foley, according to Audio Director Jeong Min Seo, is the proper fusion of sound that exists in the contemporary with futuristic sound that does not yet exist.

Team Beam acknowledges that some Exteel players may be a little intimidated if they have to engage in a hardcore PvP battle mode from the very start. They plan to add early cooperative missions to the game at some point to ease that entry-point. The team believes that Exteel in its current state of design has much to offer Korean players, but they admit that gradually adding certain features will round out the package. We tend to agree. Incorporating a few cooperative or story-based features would make the game an easier sell on the international stage, as western players (even devoted PvP'ers) tend to enjoy a hint of PvE campaign in games with persistent character elements. Even games like Exteel, where action is king. NCsoft will probably reveal its official North American plan for Exteel at E3, so if the game looks like something you'd enjoy, by all means, let them know!

Swords and knives are popular with new players because of their high combo potential.





System(s)	PC	Publisher	Atari/Wizards of the Coast
Developer	Turbine	Online/Multi	6p group/12p raid
Available	February	ESRB Rating	T

Dungeons and Dragons Online: Stormreach

Carving out a niche in a den of kobolds Review

words Mike Griffin

Recommended system specs	
OS: Windows XP	Video: GeForce 6800/Radeon X800
Processor: 2.4 GHz+	Sound: Audigy 2+
Memory: 1 GB RAM	Internet: Broadband

Dungeons and Dragons Online is not your typical MMO. Where games like WoW or EverQuest eventually peak with all-consuming, time-devouring raid encounters, DDO invites players into a more intimate experience with an emphasis on highly-designed interactive dungeons built primarily for smaller group chemistry. The game also introduces a brand of twitch-control combat that blends reflexes and traditional 20-sided dice stat rolls using official D&D 3.5 rules.

Playing through to the game's current max character level reveals a rather thin content structure and some weak core systems. Despite these factors working against DDO early in its life, it remains an eminently playable hub and instance-based multiplayer online RPG.

In this first offering of DDO, players will spend most of their time in the large city of Stormreach. The city is awash in vibrant colors and particle-enhanced manifestations of magic and arcane technology. There is a strong sense of art and navigation working together here, as key pathways frequently line up to highlight impressive panoramic views in the distance. Without this strong layout and the aforementioned coating of high-end effects, Stormreach and the

surrounding Xen'drik region wouldn't look quite so impressive. Many objects are too low-poly and the forest and jungle areas are plagued by some pretty hideous assets. Also, banners, trees and flora rarely animate, so the presentation—despite a layer of next-gen sheen—is somewhat stiff.

City wards are sliced up into unique zones and the loading screens between each area are brief. The game also loads when you enter any shop or tavern. Regeneration, bind points and quests can all be found in taverns, so you spend plenty of time in the local bar. Incidentally, the inns and taverns have some great acoustic medieval-style guitar tunes. Food and beverages will temporarily increase your regen rate, but you can only eat and





Party people
If you're big on soloing, D&D Online is not your game. Sure, it's possible to finish quests on your own, but chances are you'll just get burned. Bring some friends.

"Most importantly, you can develop a very unique character that can contribute to a party, regardless of class."

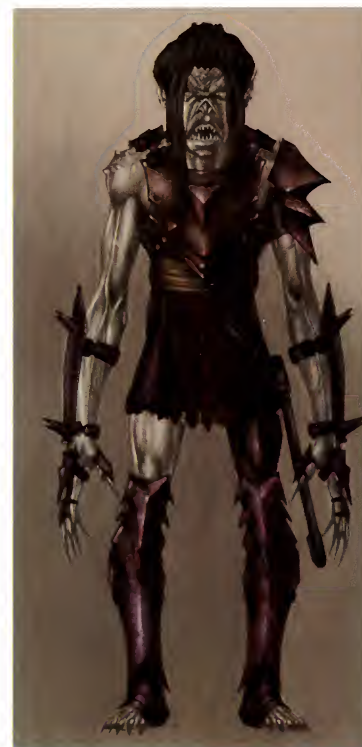


drink inside taverns. There was a fairly universal aversion to this tavern rest routine among players we encountered, as it can prove disruptive. Ultimately the city's main thoroughfares act as a hub and little else, with clickable doors, manholes and trails that lead to other instanced zones. There isn't much to encourage socializing in the game's largest and prettiest shared city spaces.

It's easy to find and create groups in Dungeons and Dragons Online using the LFG search tool and this is one of the game's strongest interface elements. Unfortunately the UI is only adequate for most standard tasks and it can be straight-up lackluster in some essential areas. The game's simplistic town maps are merely passable and the quest journal needs an improved layout with a real sorting system. Finding relevant info in the quest text and locating the quest entrance is more complicated than it should be... unless you've already repeated the quest several times. This is an online RPG; you *will* join a group and discover that they've lined up a bunch of quests that you've already completed. Luckily DDO offers three different difficulty settings per dungeon, with improved rewards at higher difficulty. During testing we ended up completing one quest in particular a whopping eight times. That quest is Redwillow's Ruins, and it was rather enjoyable the first seven runs.

DDO earns most of its grade on quests in the depths of catacombs, swords clashing, fireballs in flight, and stone grinding against wall. There's something very appealing about the feel of a DDO instance because of the traps, secret doors, puzzles, ladders and ledge grabbing. You and your party are contending with quest objectives, smelly bad guys, and the environment itself. Iron gates will slam shut behind you, floors will give way and streams of acid will spew forth. The traps blend in well with the environment, and when your rogue slinks her way up to a control box and dismantles a trap, it looks and sounds cool. The jury-rigged implementation of instant melee attacks and blocks adds an interesting flavor to MMO combat and spells generally have a nice presence, whether stacking multiple debuff effects on the same enemy, locking foes in a wall of web, or summoning a hell hound to a Kobold barbecue. Most importantly, you can develop a very unique character that can contribute to a party, regardless of class. Feel like playing a skeleton charming militant sorcerer? How about a trap-springing bard with a song for every battle? Between all the skills, enhancements and multi-classing opportunities, DDO provides ample opportunity for creative character building.

After a few more months of refinement and content additions, Dungeons and Dragons Online will be in a much happier place. The game already possesses some



very strong fundamentals at release (such as built-in voice communication), but we tend to worry about DDO's long term potential. The game lacks PvP and item crafting, and while a couple of raids (12-player max) are available, there isn't much of an end game vision to motivate and inspire players. Also, we have to ask: why the Eberron universe? It's a pretty cool mix of magic and pseudo-mechanical elements like the Warforged race, but wouldn't Forgotten Realms be the best possible choice for a D&D Online game? Sure, it's more traditional fantasy, but just imagine the reaction to a Drizzt sighting in a massively multiplayer game. It would be explosively popular. With Eberron, that built-in buzz isn't there yet. Nonetheless, Dungeons and Dragons Online will provide a nice vacation from the epic raid game and a great alternative for players that prefer regular grouping in their online RPGs. DDO can't match the breadth and polish of the genre's best titles, and yet those same titles have nothing on DDO's best dungeons. Roll the bones.

Dungeons and Dragons Online: Stormreach

score **7.5**

- +** The instanced approach to questing nails the D&D feel and runs with it. Adaptive dungeon music in a MMO is refreshing. Ample character development.
- Inconsistent visuals, including some nasty humanoid NPC animations. With this MMO design model it may be difficult to provide enough content to players.



ask alienware

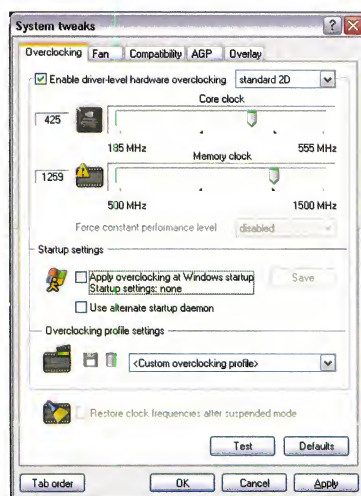
no. 01 // april 2006

Welcome to the first installment of Ask Alienware. We've partnered with the high performance PC specialists at Alienware for a monthly hardware-help feature designed to inform and assist the contemporary PC gamer.

Q. If a person wants to try their hand at overclocking their PC, what kind of safe introductory steps would you recommend?

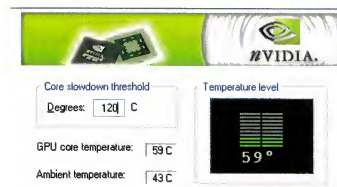
Alienware: First off, if a user is not comfortable with the technical aspects of their PC, such as CPU thermal limits, it is a good idea to stay away from overclocking. With that said, here are some tips:

- Get background information on your components including the motherboard, processor and graphics card. A good place to start is the manufacturers' websites. Find out if the components can be overclocked, and if they can, look for their limitations. Some motherboards do not allow overclocking. If this is not listed on the manufacturer's website, search the Internet.



- Once you are comfortable with the information, a good next step is to utilize overclocking software applications. These applications work as a guide to helping you overclock your system without having

to make a deep dive into the BIOS and change the multiplier and voltages.



Keeping your PC cool is essential when overclocking.

- Although overclocking can definitely provide performance enhancements, there is a risk of damaging your components to a point where you will need to replace them. Be careful!

Q. What kind of basic performance improvements can players expect in PC games when using a multi-core CPU?



Alienware: We know that consumers are doing much more with their PCs now than they ever have before. That includes running multiple background applications while playing games. Dual core CPUs allow gamers to maintain a high level of gaming performance while also running background applications such as TeamSpeak or Ventrilo, listening to their favorite music, creating CDs and much more. With this new usage model, dual core CPUs are enhancing the gamers' experience.

Q. Many PC gamers are upgrading to high end LCD displays. How does the "ms" speed of an LCD monitor affect the performance of a modern PC game?

Alienware: The refresh rate of an LCD, measured in milliseconds (ms), is an important factor to consider when

determining which LCD to purchase. LCDs with slower response rates will generate blurry patterns around the edges of objects or images that are moving throughout any game, making for a low-quality viewing experience. In addition to blurry objects, slower response rate LCDs generate ghosting. 'Ghosting' is where a trail of the same object appears on the screen as it moves. When considering an LCD for gaming, go with the lowest ms LCD that fits into your budget. The lower the ms, the better the gaming experience.

Q. When it comes to graphics cards and the newest PC games, what is the most important spec to look for?

Alienware: The most important factor to consider when making a graphics card decision is the graphics processing unit (GPU) type. Nvidia and ATI offer a wide range of GPU options, however, the latest GPU from Nvidia is the GeForce 7900 and the latest from ATI is the Radeon x1900. These GPUs take advantage of cutting-edge technology allowing users to get the best video experience possible. The newer the GPU type, the better the performance.



Once you select a GPU type, the next factor to consider is the clock frequency and the memory speeds. Typically Nvidia and ATI offer different 'flavors' within

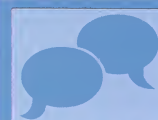
each GPU family with different clock frequencies and memory speeds. Higher frequencies and faster speeds deliver better performance.

Q. Do high speed hard drives provide a serious performance increase in games?



Alienware: High speed hard drives provide a performance benefit to any game, including the latest titles—such as FEAR—that requires access to files that are stored on your PC's hard drive. The higher the RPMs, the faster the information on your hard drive can be found, getting you back into the game sooner.

"Dual core CPUs allow gamers to maintain a high level of gaming performance while also running background applications..."



If you have a pressing hardware-related inquiry for the Alienware experts regarding anything from motherboards and mice to bitrates and firewalls, send them along to askalienware@playmagazine.com. Each month we'll award our favorite Ask Alienware submission with a free 1-year subscription, so don't be shy!

Valve greenlights Half-Life 2: Episode One



Aftermath is no more. Now it's Half-Life 2: Episode One, arriving this spring. And Valve says Episode Two is already deep in production. First off, Episode One will be a standalone game. No Half-Life 2 included or required to run. As a bonus, Episode One

will include Half-Life 2: Deathmatch and the Source-enhanced version of HL1: Deathmatch. Just like SIN Episodes, we're looking at a \$19.99 price point (download or retail) and 4-6 hours of gameplay per episode. HL2: Ep.1 picks up immediately where Half-Life 2



left off. This episode you will spend almost the entire time with Alyx in both combat and non-combat areas. Remember, Alyx grew up in City 17, so when everything goes to hell in a hand basket she knows how to take charge and move around the city. We'll

also find out what happened to Dr. Breen and how the G-Man is connected to the giant maelstrom swirling above the city. Ideally, the HL2 and SIN installments will release during each other's "off season" so there's a steady flow of episodic goodness.

Midway teams with Turbine for LotR Online

For a while it seemed as though Turbine was going to remain steadfast about self-publishing the Lord of the Rings MMO—quite possibly over a digital delivery service. And then reality struck hard: retail tends to love anything with "Lord of the Rings" in the title. Enter Midway, Turbine's new co-publisher and distributor for LotR Online. Midway's PC presence has been rather modest of late. Lord of the Rings Online certainly adds a key platform title to Midway's '06 line-up. This deal also relieves Turbine of a great deal of financial pressure, allowing its internal teams to stay focused. Speculation suggests that the D&D Online and LotR Online development teams were stretched quite thin recently, as DDO prepared to ship.



Top-Selling Software

Week of Ending: Dec. 1 - February 11, 2006

01	Star Wars: Empire At War	LucasArts
02	World of Warcraft	Vivendi Universal
03	MS Age Of Empires III	Microsoft
04	The Sims 2	Electronic Arts
05	Star Wars: Empire At War Collector's Edition	LucasArts
06	Civilization IV	2K Games (Take 2)
07	Battlefield 2	Electronic Arts
08	MS Zoo Tycoon 2	Microsoft
09	Dungeon Siege 2	Microsoft
10	Call of Duty 2	Activision

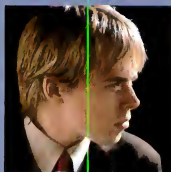
Huxley: PC vs. 360 for the win



Webzen's Unreal Engine 3-powered MMOFPS is on track for a fall release on PC and Xbox 360, and we've learned that Huxley's netcode is already supporting multiplayer gameplay between both versions of the title. In short: owners of Huxley players on X360 and vice-versa. Huxley also features a full PvE mission

structure where players can advance the story, earn experience and level up. As you level, you'll be able to use better armor and guns and drive tougher, more powerful vehicles. There's also a separate ranking system for PvP with leadership rewards like tactical field strikes. All the makings of a very powerful next-gen game!





< Nick Des Barres

Dai Kohama >



AOU Show 2006 Report

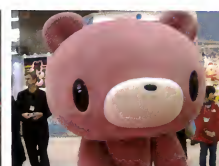
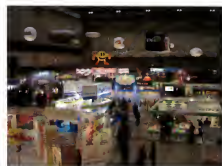
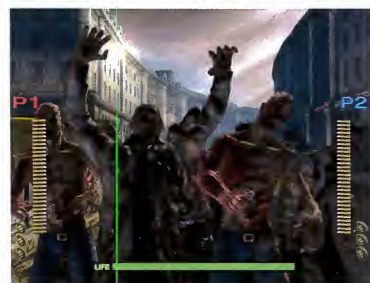
With the arcade scene in Japan but a shadow of its former self, traditional games long since having been ousted by UFO catchers, prize machines, and music sims, we weren't expecting a whole lot from the AOU Show 2006. Due in large part to Sega, however, it's clearly too early to count arcade gaming out. While generally lackluster, this year's AOU had a fair amount of toothsome ¥100-munchers on display. To wit:

Sega

God bless Sega, the only major video game company that still considers the arcade a viable business. This year's lineup is all about Sega's new arcade platform, the Lindbergh, which is essentially a very high-spec PC sporting a 3GHz Pentium 4 processor and a custom Nvidia GPU similar to that being used in the PlayStation 3. In addition to the stellar-looking hi-def era After Burner reboot, an update to House of the Dead 4 featuring new characters and stages, and Warashi's 2-D shooter Trigger Heart Exelica, Sega was displaying a near-final version of Virtua Fighter 5 with the new monkey-style kung-fu nymphet Eileen playable.

Notable games:

Virtua Fighter 5
House of the Dead 4 Special
After Burner Climax
Trigger Heart Exelica
Virtua Striker 4 Ver.2006



Namco

Namco's big game at AOU was the arcade version of the highly regarded Soul Calibur III, with new moves, new costumes, tweaked balance, and Hwang, Li Long, and Amy expanded into fully-realized characters with original movesets. Quite nice, but one wonders why Namco didn't just release an arcade version in the first place. Also on display was Time Crisis 4, the latest entry in that venerable gun shooting series. Running on PlayStation 2-based hardware, however, it couldn't hold a candle to Sega's House of the Dead 4 in terms of visuals.

Notable games:

Time Crisis 4
Soul Calibur III Arcade Edition



Konami

As usual, Konami was sporting an array of music titles, the most notable of which was the first new Dance Dance Revolution in several years, Supernova. An arcade version of soccer sim Winning Eleven 2006 and a seemingly Killer 7-inspired gun shooting game known as Cooper's 9 were also on display.

Notable games:

Dance Dance Revolution Supernova
Winning Eleven 2006 Arcade Championship
Cooper's 9



AMI

At AMI's booth was Cave's latest traditional 2-D shooter, Pink Sweets: Ibara Sorekara, the sequel to last-year's controversial Ibara. According to Cave, we can expect a "super erotic" shooter without Ibara's much-debated dynamic difficulty adjustment.

Notable games:

Pink Sweets: Ibara Sorekara

Taito

An FPS in the arcade? You better believe it. Rather than trying to cobble one together themselves, Taito went straight to the best—Valve—and licensed Half-Life 2. With FPSes getting a traditionally lukewarm reception in Japan, it remains to be seen whether Taito's arcade gamble will pay off. Shown on video was a revival of Taito's classic Chase H.Q., looking quite spiffy on Taito's PC-based Type X+ hardware.

Notable games:

Half-Life 2 Survivor
Chase H.Q.



System(s)	Arcade (Taito Type X+)	Publisher	Capcom
Developer	Capcom	Available	2006

AOU Preview

War of the Grail

Capcom fighting back in the arcades

words Nick Des Barres

The rest of the AOU may have been decidedly lackluster, but the Capcom booth was on fire. Why? The answer lies with four gorgeous little words, friends: New arcade fighting game. Yeah, no kidding. The redoubtable Capcom is coming back to a market they officially abandoned long ago, with the genre they all but created. Though maintaining a Moai-like stony silence with regards to War of the Grail's gameplay details (the game was presented only on video and is reportedly still a ways from completion), Capcom has let slip a number of tidbits, such as the fact that both competitive and cooperative play modes will be offered, and that net play will be available right from the

arcade. Players will purchase an IC card, on which will be stored their character and item data. Apparently, characters will experience RPG-style growth, with equipment fully customizable before battle. But what the heck kind of "fighting game" is it? Nobody really knows, and Capcom's not telling. They even have yet to confirm the number of players, though it's probably safe to speculate that that number is four. Each person will seemingly take control of a core character (one of around 16 total, judging from the select screen), along with that character's entire army. This conceit opens up heretofore undreamt-of possibilities in competitive play... try to imagine an RTS/fighting game hybrid. If any company's fit to break the tired, one-on-one, martial arts mold, it is Capcom, and

we anxiously await details. So what else do we know? Precious little. The game runs on Taito's Type X+ hardware, essentially a high-spec PC, and features characters by Capcom's resident doyenne of design, Kinu Nishimura. Announced so far are five: Arthur, king of the Britons, Pallas Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom and war, Nu Wa, a vajra-wielding creator goddess from China, Gargantua, a cyclops, and Asterios, a minotaur. Play Japan plans to follow War of the Grail closely, and will update you as soon as Capcom decides to bless us with more information. **play**



It's a Capcom fighting game. With Kinu Nishimura character designs. In the arcade. Somebody pinch me.



System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Sony Computer Entertainment	Available	Now (Japan)
Developer	Punchline/Shirogumi	Online/Multi	None	ESRB Rating	NA

GAME REVIEW

Rule of Rose

An RPG Without a roman numeral!?

The Japanese have a term for games that are more about story, aesthetic, and ambience rather than gameplay: "Fun'iki-ge". Fun'iki-ge, or "atmosphere games", comprise a genre subset that seemingly only exists in Japan: Killer 7, Snatcher, Policenauts, and Shadow of Destiny are all good examples (though last year's Indigo Prophecy, hailed as a breath of fresh air in the West, would also qualify). The fun'iki-ge's closest spiritual ancestor lies perhaps with the classic Sierra and LucasArts PC adventures of the 80s and early 90s, games whose raison d'être is simply to envelop one in a meticulously-crafted world and tell a damn good story. By that criterion, Rule of Rose would be a perfect ten. How unfortunate, then, that such a brilliant story has been bound to such a lackluster game.

First, a little background. Rule of Rose, released with zero fanfare and no advertising by Sony in Japan, is a collaboration between game studio Punchline and computer graphics firm Shirogumi (responsible for the CG cinemas in games such as Soul Calibur III, Onimusha 2, Resident Evil 0, and Baten Kaitos, as well as theatrical films like Returner and Juvenile). Shirogumi is also one of the top go-to studios for "ghost rendering", having recently provided assistance on Square-Enix's Dirge of Cerberus: Final Fantasy VII. Punchline has a more storied past, being one of the four spinoff companies formed from legendary bohemian game atelier

Love-de-Lic, most famous for the witty PSone anti-RPG Moon. The other spinoffs include Grasshopper Manufacture (the aforementioned Killer 7, Samurai Champloo) and Skip (Chibi Robo). Clearly, we are dealing with serious alterna-game talent here.

The one thing tying together each game that derives from the Love-de-Lic legacy is a strong emphasis on setting, aesthetic, and concept—one would almost be tempted to say *gimmick*—rather than any sort of tried-and-true gameplay, and that's why we love them. However, Rule of Rose is, in many ways, the Love-de-Lic formula gone wrong. Make no mistake, I love this game. Many will hate it. It is an acquired taste. Put simply, the story approaches genius, the gameplay is near-disastrous. But before I get to what's bad about the game, let me expound on what's good.

It begins with the story, which is very difficult to encapsulate without ruining its jaw-dropping twists. The game opens in March, 1930, somewhere in Bedfordshire, England. A recently-orphaned girl, Jennifer—her parents were killed in a spectacular airship crash—has been sent to the Rose Garden Orphanage, far out in the country, and arrives in the middle of the night. (Strangely enough, Jennifer is 19—a little old to be getting sent to an orphanage. What might at first seem to be a cultural misunderstanding by the Japanese, however, later turns out to be a crucial plot

words Nick Des Barres



point.) She finds the orphanage abandoned by its headmaster and adult staff, strewn with trash and covered in chalk graffiti. The only inhabitants are a spooky, ragtag handful of children who have formed their own social order, complete with an "aristocracy" and "peasantry", in the absence of adult supervision. The eerie brood seems to have been expecting her, as they wait outside the orphanage gates idly beating a bloody sack that appears to contain a small animal. The residents of the orphanage waste no time luring Jennifer into a trap, binding her with rope, unspeakably humiliating her, performing arcane rituals, and



Will poor Amanda ever find the right shade to match her elegant pink cardigan?



finally burying her alive in the garden. Model children these are not.

But our Jennifer is not dead; after losing consciousness she awakens to find herself tied to a girder onboard an (impossibly) cavernous zeppelin, seemingly bound for India but never to arrive. A disembodied child's voice speaks to her through a scratchy loudspeaker system, informing her that if she wishes to continue to live, she must offer a gift in tribute to the "Aristocracy of the Red Crayon" once per month. And so the tale begins. To reveal more would be to do Rule of Rose an injustice; one's perception of the storyline changes drastically over the course of the game, and indeed the manner in which the story is told can be just as fascinating as the story itself. Jennifer's saga unfolds over the course of a year, with chapters divided into months. Each month, however, is presented entirely out of sequence, à la the cinema of Quentin Tarantino, and by the time you've reached the last chapter (which happens to be the first, chronologically) your previous understanding of the scenario will seem positively quaint.

A great video game story is, obviously, buoyed by high-gloss packaging, and in this department Rule of Rose does not disappoint. The impressive realtime engine takes its cues from the Silent Hill series, with the same noise filter, same rusty, dusty, dirty look, and same camera angles, but where the game really shines is in the amorphous and hard-to-define area of overall presentation. I'm not talking expressly about graphics, though of course they play a part. Deceptively simple elements such as the creepy storybooks used as framing devices for each chapter, the in-game narration's constant dispassionate referral to Jennifer as "the Unlucky Girl," menu designs evoking a chalkboard, utilization of actual British voice talent (rather than cheaping out and casting in Japan, as is often the case), spare but brutally effective score by Yutaka Minobe (Skies of Arcadia), and an impeccable attention to period particulars all cohere into a whole that just feels *right*. Punchline and Shirogumi nail every detail, with a surprising accuracy that belies their origin. You just don't expect a Japanese-developed product set in period Europe to be this convincing, and nor do you

expect the delicate and expert manner in which inherently spooky Western children's culture (nursery rhymes, fairytales, storybooks) are put to such clever use.

The creators certainly have exemplary artistic flair, but they sure don't seem to know how to craft a very engaging gameplay experience. Rule of Rose is Survival Horror...but only begrudgingly so. Early in the game Jennifer rescues a mangy dog named Brown (the "Filthy Dog," as the narration has it), and most of the game is spent finding objects for him to sniff. Brown will follow the scent—at an insufferably slow pace—to another item/location/person. Repeat ad nauseam. Essentially, the game is one long fetch quest, interspersed with some of the most dismal combat the genre has ever seen. Jennifer is forced to fight disturbing goat-, rabbit-, and pig-headed creatures known as the Little People, with an array of short-range weapons like crowbars, knives, and icepicks (a gun can be found near the end of the game, but is essentially useless). 'Twould be all well

"But when was the last time you played as a prewar English orphan, in a massive zeppelin that may also be an abandoned orphanage.."

and good, as long as she didn't control like something from a bootleg Color Dreams NES game. Collision is awful, movement is sluggish, game balance non-existent. Bosses are absurdly difficult, and the poor camera system always seems to keep them just out of view. The lack of continues and/or save points near boss encounters only compounds the problem. Admittedly, the play mechanic of

Brown the dog is interesting, but the gimmick was already deployed a year ago in Capcom's Demento/Haunting Grounds. Rule of Rose was certainly in development before that game was announced, so it's not a rip-off, and the two implementations of the idea have little in common, but it demands a mention.

Yeah, so the gameplay experience ain't all the great. But when was the last time you

played as a prewar English orphan, in a massive zeppelin that may also be an abandoned orphanage, giant whale, figment of the imagination, damaged mind attempting to parse disastrously scattered memories, or none/all of the above? That's what I thought. A shoddy game engine almost doesn't matter: The story (and all-pervading malaise-mélange perfectly captured by the game's elegant staging) really *is* that good. If this all sounds a little vague, I just don't want to ruin the experience. A tip for potential players: Look everywhere. Read everything— newspaper clippings, diaries, storybooks. The plot is not handed to you on a silver platter...you have to actively seek it out. Rule of Rose is a game you keep playing long after the PlayStation 2 is shut off and DualShock put down, mentally arranging chronology and pondering clues. Unlike many of the Silent Hill games, which suggest closure but do not really offer it, Rule of Rose's plot is relatively airtight. Just don't expect a conventionally happy ending from a game that displays "And they all lived happily ever after..." Instead of "Game Over" should its heroine happen to die.

Is Rule of Rose worth playing? I'm going to say yes, most definitely. I feel uneasy giving the game a 7.5— my personal tilt would skew it up into the high 8s, low 9s, but as an objective critic I can't in any good conscience score it higher. You're definitely going to need patience to get through this one, but if you have a taste for the blackest of black tales, shot through with frenzied red, I assure you, you will be well rewarded. **play**

Rule of Rose

score **7.5**

- + Engrossing story, gorgeous visuals, evocative soundtrack.
- Clunky gameplay, awful battle system.

Freakish goat-headed Little People molest the Unlucky Girl



System(s) PlayStation 2
Developer SNK Playmore

Publisher SNK Playmore
Online/Multi NA

Available Now (Japan)
ESRB Rating NA

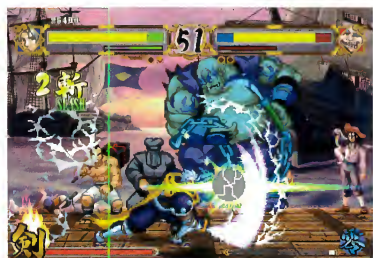
GAME REVIEW

Samurai Spirits

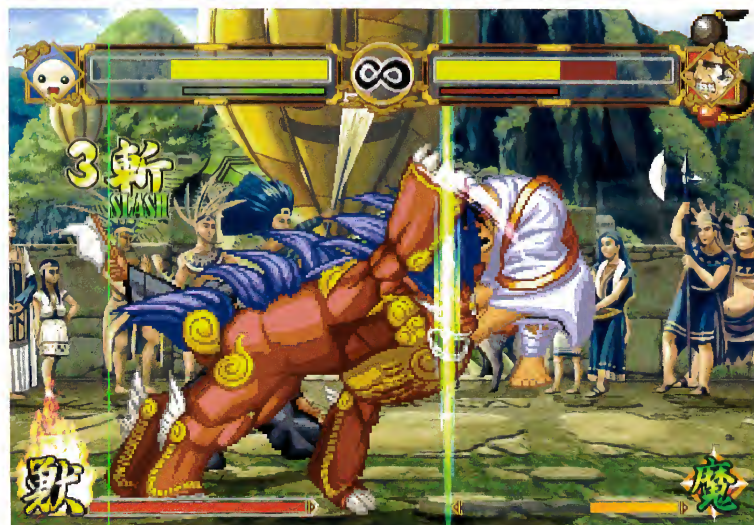
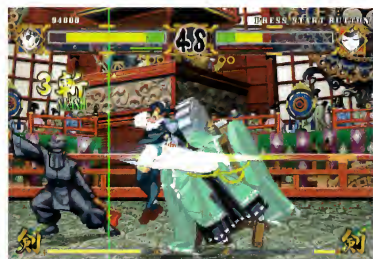
Tenkaichi Kenkyakuden

Embody fierce chambara in 2-D parallel worlds

words Nick Des Barres



52 playable characters. Once again: 52 playable characters.



Ah, the competitive 2-D fighting game, that old chestnut. Has any other game genre exploded into mainstream success so quickly, then petered out into niche status seemingly as quick as it came? What began with the neutron bomb of Street Fighter II in 1991 was all but dead a decade later. Nobody, apparently, ever informed SNK Playmore, who continue to churn out disc after disc of recycled sprites from the Neo-Geo era. Samurai Spirits: Tenkaichi Kenkyakuden (Loose translation: "Legend of the Finest Swordsmen Beneath Heaven", sounds far snappier in Japanese) is no exception, but it may just be the best rehash the company has ever released.

Tenkaichi's main selling point is the fact that every character who has ever put in an appearance in a 2-D Samurai game, no matter how small, is playable (and this includes minor characters like the dodgy headswaps from Zero/V, Yumeji and Sankuro, and even Kim Ung Che, a version of Gaira from the censored Korean version of Zankuromusoden/III). In

"Ah, the competitive 2-D fighting game, that old chestnut."

addition to six completely-redrawn-from-scratch sprites for characters absent since Shin/II, there are four all-new duellists: Andrew, the bayonet-wielding President of the United States (seriously), Sugoroku, a character patterned off traditional taiko festival drummers, Ochamaro, a karakuri (clockwork) automaton, and, well, Iroha. Erotic Iroha, whose art is featured on this page, has caused quite a stir in Japan for her skimpy French maid-meets-Goth Loli-meets-kimono wardrobe, and slavish devotion to her unseen male "master". Fan opinion remains split between those who insist this *moe*-era character doesn't belong in a Samurai, citing gender stereotyping, and others who just think she's really freaking hot. In any case, Tenkaichi features a full 24 characters more than the previous entry in the series, for a grand total of 52. Certainly, there are a few palette/headswaps, and every Animal Friend except Mizuki's Haon is selectable as a separate entity and thus counted as a character, but that's still a lot. Further, each character is initially selectable in one of six styles, called Spirits. The first five are based on the radically differing game systems from each previous entry in the series, while the sixth style is an original system developed for Tenkaichi. As if that wasn't enough, three more bonus Spirits become gradually unlockable, one of which is fully customizable via an elaborate menu system. Not counting

the custom style, this adds up to 416 possible character/Spirit permutations. Every Samurai character, every Samurai playstyle, all in one product: At least in terms of gameplay, it would be hard to imagine a more respectful, completist sendoff to the series.

Sadly, the visuals do not fare as well: Character sprites remain unaltered from their first appearance over a decade ago, in Zankuromusoden. While the realist in me knows this game would not exist without heavy asset recycling, the purely fanboy element of my psyche would have preferred to see SNKP's talented human pixel-pushers drawing all new sprites in high resolution, without having to adhere to design conventions laid down eleven or more years ago. The limited number of backgrounds, although all vibrant, well-conceived, and well-rendered, does nothing to help. For a game with 52 characters, 12 backgrounds seems a bit lacking. Fortunately, the musical score is absolutely fantastic, perhaps the best in the series, replete with lush shamisen/shakuhachi/koto arrangements, and even a vocal track in the style of Meiko Kaji's themes to her 70s revenge films. And yet as good as the music is, its aural accompaniment—voices—marks an abysmal low for the series. You see, the Samurai games have remained remarkably consistent with regards to voice actors. Masaki Usui has always been Haohmaru, and Harumi Ikoma has always been Nakoruru. How disenchanting that literally every voice has been recast and replaced. There are some things that just aren't meant to be tinkered with, and this was one of them.

The voice fiasco may be sad, but the most common complaint leveled against Tenkaichi—the fact that it has no blood—is, for me, a non-issue. The spirit (pardon the pun) of this final entry in the Samurai series is light in tone, and indeed the setting for the game is a traditional matsuri festival. Gushing geysers of gore would have been out of place. More pressing for me is the lack of progressive scan, rather strange when one considers every SNKP PlayStation 2 game for the past several years has offered it. These are, of course, minor and fetishistic complaints. With an American version unlikely in the near future (V is just now getting a home release), Samurai Spirits: Tenkaichi Kenkyakuden is ripe for the importing. Fans of the series will not be disappointed. **play**

Samurai Spirits Tenkaichi Kenkyakuden

score **8.0**

- + Obscene amount of characters, extensive customization options, lush soundtrack
- Decade-old sprites, recast voices, no progressive scan

RETURN

Sell by date: infinity

Super Magnetic Neo

There can only be one...jumping cereal-box head

System(s)	Dreamcast	Publisher	Crave
Developer	Genki	Available	June 14, 2000

Looking back at all of the 3D platformers I'd hoped would spawn sequels (things are drying up for me of late), I ran across Super Magnetic Neo and had to plop it into the Treamcast (the wacky portable Dreamcast with the crappy screen—buyer beware) to see if it was everything I'd remembered. As the first current-generation platformer I had ever played (it's crazy that—had it survived—the Dreamcast would still be considered the same generation as the PS2), SMN pretty much blew my mind; adopting a similar path to Universal's blockbusting Bandicoot, with 3D action, chase, and riding levels on rails, complimented by lush polygonal 2D stages. The thing about Neo was, and is, that for being pug-puppy cute it's a challenging and supremely addictive game. The hub is overdone and the camera can drive you insane but with patience the gameplay and

especially Neo can really grow on you. Just look at him. Is he not the perfect candidate for his own brand of cereal? And Genki was behind him all the way. Digging through my archives I happened across the interview I conducted for Neo's debut and the sentiment was 100% franchise implications. In the end, the combination of Crave as publisher and his freakish looks did the poor little guy in, (he was even cancelled in Japan—ouch), but like so many impish freaks he'll live on in at least one memory forever. Dave Halverson

"The thing about Neo was, and is, that for being pug-puppy cute it's a challenging and supremely addictive game."



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(anime, toy, snack and other products)

Released by Geneon Entertainment

Running Time 100 minutes

Rating 16 and up

Available April 25

Kannazuki no Miko

Somebody call a priestess

words Dave Halverson

Soma Ogami, the ultra-rich most popular girl in school, is having secret lunches with (and putting the moves on) the shapely but shy loser of the class, Himeko Kurusugawa. But the most popular boy in school, Chikane Himemiya—whom the student body is convinced is the prince to Soma's princess—secretly lusts after her too! Oh my! What's drawing these beautiful campus coolies to the likes of Himeko? Has *The OC* moved to Japan? Nope, it's just the latest calm before the requisite storm in the latest high-school-kids-cum-Japansaviors adventure from Geneon. Once the legendary eight-headed dragon Orochi (sorry King Ghidra—party's over) rears its ugly head (all 8 of them) all is revealed: Soma and Himeko are shrine maidens (lunar and solar respectively)—called to arms to beat down the legendary beast back from whence it came, one neck at a time. Each neck begets a demon crony that...pilots a giant robot of course! You thought you were safe? Mua-ha-ha! No decent evil coup can come off without giant mechs!

Twist number one: Chikane is the 2nd neck! However, when ordered to kill Himeko he fights his demonic calling and becomes her protector! But it's not all naked baths, caviar, and champagne dreams for Himeko just yet as she moves into Somas Posh manor. There are seven necks to go and the Orochi (a.k.a. bad guys and girls) are just getting started.

With animation produced by J.C. Staff (*R.O.D. the TV*, *Ikki Tousen*, *Azumanga Daioh*) *Kannazuki No Miko* is an altogether polished new series with great animation, pacing and designs (even if some of the mechs are oh so conventional). There's a small trees worth of sap oozing from its love triangle but the depiction of hell—more *Little Nicky* than say, *Constantine*—give the festivities a queer sensibility that keeps things just dark enough, hovering somewhere between the melodrama and the proverbial ether.

When they're not saving Japan, Soma and Himeko like to snuggle.

Kannazuki no Miko
Vol. 1: The Solar Princess

score 8.5

+ KNM has it all; romance, demons, mechs, and high production values.

— Himeko is whiny... really whiny. She needs to snap out of it ASAP. No way can I take 12 episodes of her mousiness.

"You thought you were safe? Mua-ha-ha! No decent evil coup can come off without giant mechs!"

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Taro the Dragon Boy

AKA the Byline

Released by	Discotek/Ryko	Running Time	75 Minutes
Rating	N/A	Available	January 31, 2006

You know how there's all these "energy drinks" these days promising you'll sprout wings, or run a 5K in less than 10 seconds? Well, long ago, little Taro was a lackadaisical kid, eating, sleeping and not much else until he was given a potion that gave him the strength of an army—but only when he was helping someone. His grandmother, seeing his newfound potential, tells him the story of his mother who sacrificed her human form so that he could grow up, resulting in her becoming a dragon, exiled to a lake far away. Naturally, this would cause any young boy to set out on adventure, and so he does, battling mythical creatures with bravado and harvesting rice for the weak amongst other tasks along the way to finding his mom.

A 1979 production of the legendary Toei Studios, this film is astounding for its level of production value—dare I say that it holds up ably or better than even the best of Hayao Miyazaki's works from the mid '80s. The whimsical mythical

world, the redemption of a spoiled child and bettering the lives of those he comes to know, and both the excellent subtitled and capable dub makes for a solid film experience through a robust blend of drama, action, and comedy. This one's a must for anime fans both new and old.

Too bad Hollywood can't bottle up Taro's peppy elixir and find a little redemption in its abilities, because it's been draggin' its feet for too long. **Jim Dewey**

score **9.0**

+ Director Kirio Urayama proves that it's talent and story, not technology that makes you want to watch a tale again and again.

— Prudish fans might be red-faced from Taro's naughty bits flashing from time to time, but even in that he finds redemption—underwear!



"A 1979 production of the legendary Toei Studios, this film is astounding for its level of production value..."

Loveless

Do cat people dream of humanoid mice?

Released by	Anime Works	Running Time	100 Minutes
Rating	16 and up	Available	February 14

After really getting into the manga last month I was pleasantly surprised when the *Loveless* anime showed up just weeks later. Solemn and mysterious with some of the most uneasy homosexual undertones I've ever had to squirm through—*Loveless* is the very definition of bizarre. It begins with young Ritsuka being introduced back into normal life after the untimely murder of his beloved older Brother, Seimei. After spending his first day at a new school awkwardly shunning the advances of the pathetic but abnormally large breasted Yuiko (more is sure to follow regarding these two) he's confronted by Soubi, a friend of his brothers.

Soubi is much older than Ritsuka (23 to his 12) evidenced by a lack of cat ears (young men and women in *Loveless* dawn cat ears and tails, until they lose their virginity—I warned you). So when Soubi begins kissing and stroking Ritsuka it's a bit of an MJ moment. But not to worry—Soubi or "Beloved" was actually Seimi's

"Fighter Unit" and the fondling is merely his bonding ritual with Ritsuka...a.k.a. *Loveless*. Behind the veil of reality a secret war between spell casters is brewing that will send Ritsuka into countless battles with Soubi by his side, and perhaps lead him to his brothers executioner. The anime takes some detours around scenes I loved in the manga but this is a great series that demands experiencing both. **Dave Halverson**

score **8.5**

+ Amazingly rich story and situations, beautiful character designs, great production values.

— No US dub (boo!) and well, damn—I hate subtitles!



Meow Mix

Once they get frisky it's so long cat ears.



"Young men and women in Loveless dawn cat ears and tails, until they lose their virginity!"

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Viewtiful Joe OST (Anime)

Released by: Genieon Music

Somehow life is just a little more viewtiful when you're listening to VJ's spunky OST. Like the games, Joe's anime mix is distinctly Japanese and as diverse as the adversaries he so heroically beats down.

Trigun: The First Donuts

Released by: Genieon Music

When it's not off in completely uncharted territory, Donuts is jam packed with Trigun-centric mixes fusing jungle beats, classical, jazz, gentle flurries and assorted techno with the series endemic hard driving rifts.

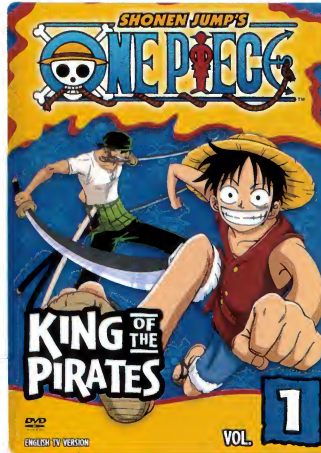


Final Fantasy: Unlimited

Released by: Genieon Music

32 short but mostly sweet Final Fantasy anime tracks. The longest song is just over two minutes long but the sum of its fantastical parts make for a joyous whole.

watch this



One Piece

Released by: Viz Media | Rating: TV Y | Volume: 1

Aye—it's the edited for TV English version but it will have to do. You'll find no crazier bounty of swashbuckling lunatics.



IGPX

Released by: Bandai Entertainment | Rating: 13 and up | Volume: 1

Don't let the fact that it debuted on TV sully your view of Bandai's OC meets F-Zero racing series IGXP. It's Production I.G. and definitely not kid-stuff.



Galaxy Railways

Released by: FUNimation Entertainment | Rating: TV PG | Volume: 5

Leiji Matsumoto's latest space opera has been waging a quiet campaign for your attention. With one volume to go there's no better time to soar into this masterful galactic enterprise.



Gilgamesh

Released by: ADV Films | Rating: TV 14 | Volume: 5

Riveting is the only way to describe Gilgamesh as it draws ever closer to its climax. Whose side are you on?

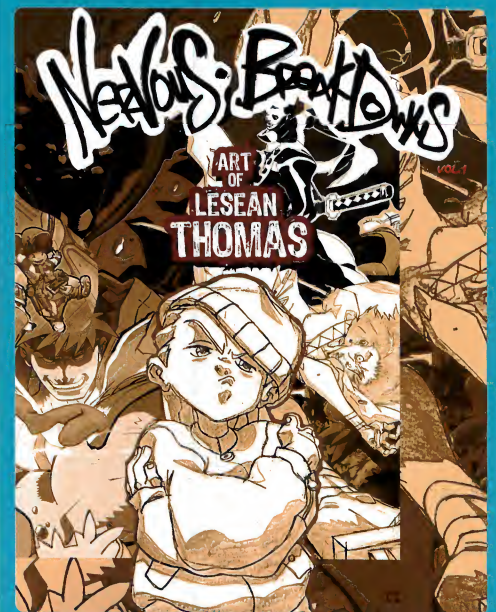


Karas (The Crow)

Released by: Manga Entertainment | Rating: 16 and up | Coming Soon

Manga Entertainment's penchant for quality continues with the much anticipated upcoming release of Karas; a sci-fi epic that fuses traditional animation and CG. That's no Power Ranger.

ogle this



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now reading

the wonderful world of manga

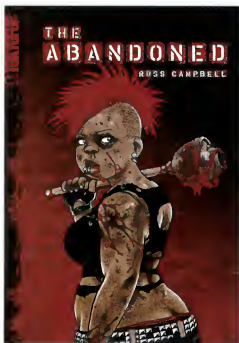
The Abandoned

At the zombie dance nobody moves

Publisher: Tokyopop | **Volume:** 1 | **Genre:** Horror | **Rating:** 16+ |
Story and Art: Ross Campbell

If "manga" is simply a graphic novel or series in paperback, then I suppose Tokyopop is really onto something. If it refers to anything that originated from Japan however, they haven't blurred the line; they've erased it. One thing is for sure—The Abandoned is one bizarre zombie tale, revolving around a pair of lesbians trying to fall in love during a zombie infestation, after a storm blows across their little island-town and turns all of the adults into meat puppets. Between the funky art, muted full-color presentation (presumably to boost the gruesome contrast when the flesh eaters are dining on entrails) and one of a kind setup, it will surely appease the zombie faithful.

Read it if... Hmmm, something tells me the preview did the trick here.



Mobile Suit Gundam Last Chronicle War

Publisher: Tokyopop | **Volume:** 1 | **Genre:** Action/Sci-Fi | **Rating:** 13+ |
Story: Tomohiro Chiba & Bandai Games Inc. | **Art:** Masato Natsumoto

Mobile Suit Gundam: Last Chronicle War takes me back to my favorite Gundam Series: MS 08th Squadron, due to its militaristic yet character-rich story. Featuring strong male and female characters, LCW is set in the original Gundam universe and is rooted in mostly military situations, providing an explosive backdrop for some of the first ever Gundam test pilots. I definitely prefer my Gundam up-close and personal over some of the universe's space-heavy predecessors that focus more on singular battles and or characters. SWC also contains some of the best art I've seen from the series in print yet. No MSG fan should be without it.

Read it if... You like your Gundam sagas up-close and heavy on character development.



Golgo 13

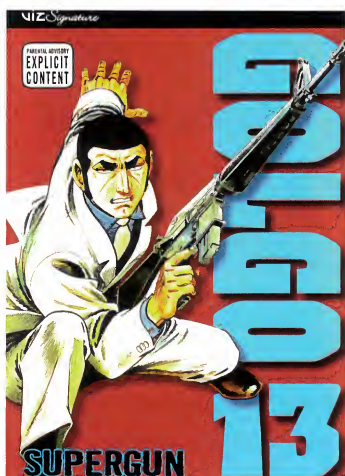
Back off man, he's a professional

Publisher: Viz Media | **Volume:** 2 | **Genre:** Action | **Rating:** 16+ | **Story and Art:** Takao Saito

When you think about "the man"—and I don't mean old white guys who keep you down—who do you think about? Duko Togo is, without question, the man. Codenamed "Golgo 13," he is one of the world's greatest assassins, and the stories of his adventures are one of the longest running mature manga titles in Japan. After a few volumes were

published in English many, many years ago, 13 "best of" volumes are coming our way thanks to Viz. For the first volume, we get story #364, The Gun at Am Shara, and #144, Hit And Run, as well as Golgo 13 "dossier" providing some background info on the character. Violence, sex, political intrigue, and The Man—thank God for this series.

Read it if... You love Golgo 13, you love action thrillers, or you just love good manga period.



READ OR DIE

Or read and live, whatever

Publisher: Viz Manga | **Volume:** 1 | **Genre:** Action/Comedy | **Rating:** 13+ |
Story: Hideyuki Kurata | **Art:** Akitaro Yamada

So, we all started following the adventures of bibliophile agent Yomiko Readman, who can take a sheet of paper and make instant weaponized origami of whatever the desperate situation calls for... she and her wall-phasing partner Ms. Deep saved the world, but that isn't where it started. Nope, all that past

mentioned in the sequel *ROD the TV* all started here, in the manga—substitute teacher meets young author prodigy—who subsequently gets kidnapped by means of giant rolls of scotch tape. Yes, you read right, and it just gets even wilder from there. Turn the pages, dear reader—its just getting warmed up.

Read it if... You want to witness the world's most lethal paper cuts.



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nobody sucks joe's beloved sylvia into a parallel universe and gets away with it.



Samurai 7

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macross

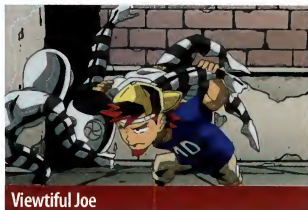
adv films

the archetype for galactic anime gets an adv overhaul.



Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	Viewtiful Joe geneon entertainment
02	Full Metal Alchemist funimation entertainment
03	Macross adv films
04	Samurai 7 funimation entertainment
05	Hikaru no Go viz media
06	Burst Angel funimation entertainment
07	Samurai Champloo geneon entertainment
08	Golgo 13 urban vision
09	Ghost in the Shell SAC 2nd Gig manga/bandai ent.
10	Street Fighter Alpha Generations manga ent.



Viewtiful Joe



Burst Angel

Play Magazine Top Ten

01	Howl's Moving Castle buena vista home entertainment
02	Samurai Champloo geneon entertainment
03	Gilgamesh adv films
04	Godannar adv films
05	Ghost in the Shell SAC 2nd Gig manga/bandai ent.
06	Desert Punk funimation entertainment
07	Kannazuki no Miko geneon entertainment
08	Full Metal Alchemist funimation entertainment
09	Diamond Daydreams adv films
10	Viewtiful Joe geneon entertainment



Howl's Moving Castle



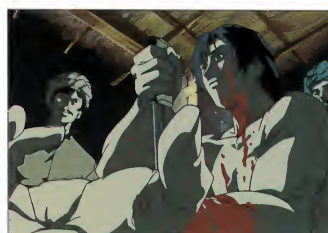
Full Metal Alchemist

Play Editor and Reader Picks



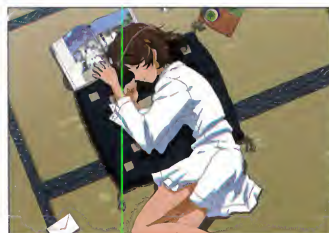
Dave Halverson

01	Howl's Moving Castle buena vista home entertainment
02	Gilgamesh adv films
03	Desert Punk funimation entertainment
04	Samurai Champloo geneon entertainment
05	One Piece viz media



Jim Dewey

01	Yugo the Negotiator adv films
02	Gakutsuou geneon entertainment
03	Taro The Dragon Boy discotek
04	Desert Punk funimation entertainment
05	Cowboy Bebop Remix bandai entertainment



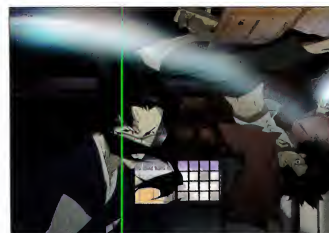
Eric Patterson

01	Diamond Daydreams adv films
02	Original Dirty Pair adv films
03	Hikaru no Go viz media
04	Maison Ikkoku viz media
05	Adolescence of Utena central park media



Nelson Lui

01	Diamond Daydreams adv films
02	Hikaru no Go viz media
03	Kaleido Star: New Wings adv films
04	Kannazuki no Miko geneon entertainment
05	Desert Punk funimation entertainment



Reader's Top Five

01	Samurai Champloo geneon entertainment
02	Burst Angel funimation entertainment
03	Full Metal Alchemist funimation entertainment
04	One Piece viz media
05	Cowboy Bebop Remix bandai entertainment

Reader's Most Wanted

01	One Piece viz media
02	Street Fighter Alpha Generations manga ent.
03	Golgo 13 urban vision
04	The Karas manga entertainment
05	Desert Punk funimation entertainment

Play Magazine Manga Top Five

01	Kamui (V2) broccoli books
02	Kamikaze (V1) tokyopop
03	MS Gundam Last War Chronicles tokyopop
04	Warcraft Shadow of Ice tokyopop
05	Galaxy Angel (V2) broccoli books

Capote

 Movie: **A** Extras: **B**

Directed by: Bennett Miller

Starring: Philip Seymour Hoffman, Catherine Keener, Clifton Collins

Released By: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment

 Rated: **R**

Credit Philip Seymour Hoffman for one of the best performances of the year as he generates the disturbing center to the somber, moving *Capote*. Hoffman plays Truman Capote, an attention hungry writer whose success comes with a price. During his stay in Kansas, he is intrigued by the details of a murder of a family of four, killed by shotgun blasts in their rural farmhouse. Obsessed by personal drive, Capote begins to build the framework for his non-fiction novel, which slowly exacts a destructive toll. The lines between the story and the storyteller begin to blur; Capote forms a clinical relationship with one of the killers, partly out of a fascination with their plight and a drive for the story, partly out of a sense of pity and personal need. They all are in some way drifters, in the wrong place at the wrong time, leading a life of spiraling decay. *Capote's* character study is subtle and often unnerving, a film of immense strength. **Brady Fiechter**



Chronicles of Narnia

 Movie: **B+** Extras: **B**

Directed by: Andrew Adamson

Starring: Tilda Swinton, Jim Broadbent, James McAvoy

Released By: Buena Vista Home Entertainment

 Rated: **PG**

A most ravishing film, filled with rousing flights of fantasy, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* was last year's pleasing answer to *Lord of the Rings*. Sanitized and scrunched down from C.S. Lewis' epic novel, *Narnia* leaves its literate power on the page, but the images on display are so exciting, you simply must sit back and soak in the grandeur of it all. The movie follows a family of two sisters and two brothers, whose mother sends them to a secluded mansion during the height of WWII. They stumble upon a magical wardrobe that leads to the warring world of Narnia, where animals speak and a wicked ice princess conducts her evil for dominance of the land. I love the intimacy and small scale of the story, the heartfelt allegory for religious good and evil. It's a simple movie in some regards, brought to life by the beautiful imagination of the setting. **Brady Fiechter**



Wallace & Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit

 Movie: **B** Extras: **B+**

Directed by: Nick Park and Steve Box

Starring: Peter Sallis, Ralph Fiennes

Released By: Ardman/DreamWorks Animation SKG

 Rated: **G**

If you've never seen the likes of Wallace & Gromit, chances are you'll find *The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* inventive and refreshing; if not brilliant in every way. If, on the other hand, you're familiar with the cheese-loving Wallace and his silent canine counterpart, you may just find it overextended and lacking in every way. Delivered in smaller doses, I find the BBC Video 3-episode DVD *The Incredible Adventures of Wallace & Gromit* a far more adventurous

and entertaining slice of pliable life. *Were-Rabbit* repurposes nearly all of the duo's well-worn gags and isn't nearly as imaginative as the shorts' more symbolic tales. *Were-Rabbit* plays it kid-friendly all the way, spinning its veggie-addicted Werewolf parody with far less ingenuity than Ardman's last feature film, the wonderfully original *Chicken Run*. It's still a wonderful piece of work that first-timers and kids will adore, but been-there, done-that cartoon gags and familiar joke-tech do not an Oscar winner make. There's no comparing this duo's latest folly with the elegance of *Corpse Bride* and *Howl's Moving Castle*. **Dave Halverson**

QUICKTAKES

Chicken Little

 Directed by: Mark Dindal / Starring: Zack Braff, Don Knotts, Joan Cusack, Patrick Stewart / Released By: Buena Vista Home Ent. / Rated: **G**

Critically speaking, the sky fell on *Chicken Little*, but that didn't stop it from earning 140 million (and climbing). Accused of being a chicken in either ogre's or fish's clothing, I'm going to air on the side of that not being all that bad a thing. *Chicken Little's* merits lie in its characters and a Jimmy Neutron-like geekiness that sets it apart from *Shrek* and *Nemo*. But who's keeping score anyway? Okay, me. And *The Incredibles* slaps them all silly. **DH**

 Movie: **B** Extras: **B+**


The Weather Man

 Directed by: Gore Verbinski / Starring: Nicolas Cage, Michael Caine, Hope Davis / Released By: Paramount Pictures / Rated: **R**


What is success, what is failure, where do we turn for that morsel of meaning in our life? The caustic *The Weather Man* doesn't offer its own version of the answers so much as expose the nasty truth of the process. Some of the best comedy exposes the personal underbelly of our lives, and this bitterly humorous film rips into the sometime-rotten flesh of the American dream with a rusty scalpel. It stars Nicolas Cage, a local Chicago weather man whose life and family are increasingly falling apart. As he juggles his search for personal discovery and acceptance, his bid for a spot on a national morning show begins to rip a bigger whole in his confused existence. The movie is more than a look at the conflict of middle age and familial drama; it takes the truthful notion of living and paints the space with existential gloom. But look to the soul of its message and *The Weather Man* leaves you with a light of redemption at the end of the cynical tunnel. **BF**

 Movie: **B+** Extras: **B-**

ZU Warriors

 Directed by: Hark Tsui / Starring: Cecilia Cheung, Ekin Cheng, Louis Koo, Patrick Tam, Sammo Hung / Released By: Miramax Home Ent. / Rated: **R**

Beware any fantasy action-adventure import that claims to either be in the style of, or from the "masters behind" *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*, which loosely translated means: Power Rangers-grade special effects and lots of supreme beings flailing about performing wire-fu. The *Zu Warrior* deities vs. demons bent on world domination plot is as thin as the wires it rides on. Watch *Kung-Fu Hustle* again. **DH**

 Movie: **C** Extras: **C+**


Seether

Interview

Shaun Morgan, Pat Callahan

By Steven Douglas Losey

South Africa has its rock star and his name is Shaun Morgan. Morgan is a realist. He's seen the industry chew up and spit out. He's experienced love, pain, victory and disappointment. He's also been the catalyst behind his band Seether, exercising their demons on stage and on radio, compiling a third Gold album and climbing. Seether has arrived. Morgan's also a good cat. His demeanor sets you at ease the moment you meet him despite the whacked video persona he's delivered... As for guitarist Pat Callahan, he's tired, enduring a late night/early morning. That doesn't hinder his enthusiasm though. Often times he echoes Morgan's sentiments while at others dishing dirt.

If I was holding the soul of the band, what would I have in my hands?—Shaun Morgan: Well, music that keeps us alive. It's what gets rid of all the trash we have inside and that's a different thing for each one of us.

What if you didn't have the music?

SM: I wouldn't be around, period; and I know that for a fact.
 Pat Callahan: I'd be playing music somewhere, man. It wouldn't matter where it was.

What are three words that describe the tone of your vibe?

SM: With the success of "Broken," a lot of people wrote us off as a one hit wonder, or even a backing band. It came from the critiques. My three words would be f*** the critiques.

Pat, as the guitarist how do you find the Seether groove?

PC: I think it's important for me to set the tone even before melody or lyrics are added. It's a cool opportunity to have being able to set a vibe of aggressive, or sad, or pretty, whatever. A lot of the cooler emotions are set through the guitar.
 SM: Throughout the ages, the Beatles, The Stones, Sabbath, all of them were identified by the guitar. You can't be a rock band without the guitar. It's what sets the tones for the songs. If it's a crappy riff it will be a crappy song... ask Trapt.

I know their road manager Pete, and their drummer Aaron, who are both

great cats...

PC: I like some of their riffs, it's the singer that I don't like.
 SM: Hey man, you spend three months of your life on the road with a band you can't stand, that's what you get. We were treated like crap. There are very few bands that we've toured with that I can't stand. They're one of them. I think it all comes down to Karma.

You mean you're either a good person or you're not?

PC: Honestly, the music business isn't just about the music, it's also about the vibe that you give off. The way you treat those around you, the way you treat your fans is important.
 SM: Let's be honest. Most of their fans are little girls. They listen to Backstreet Boys and Trapt.

Pat, you mentioned the music business. I know there have been issues with Seether.

PC: Backstabbing sucks man, when you're told one thing and something entirely different happens.
 SM: For me it's when you quit becoming a human being to people. Not just to people but to the industry, the ones we make money for. When you're just a bar code at a sound scan, that really sucks. The most

"The way you treat those around you, the way you treat your fans is important."

exploited part of everything that exists in the entertainment industry are musicians. An actor can go out and make twenty million dollars; a musician can work his ass off and tour for two years and have a thousand bucks in his pocket.

It seems like everyone from entertainment, whether it's a sports star or a movie star, takes home the bank.

SM: It's crazy man, everyone wants to party with us, but we don't really make real money. It's hard to believe.

You've probably met a lot of great people though?

SM: There's a lot of great people on the road.
 PC: We live a really cool life; don't get us wrong. It's not the eighties blow party though, and the money is a lot different, a lot less records are sold. The internet really affects sales now.
 SM: It's funny, people assume that you're

rich because you're in a band. We only know a few rich bands. Guys like Nickelback and Three Doors Down do really well cause they sell so many albums, simple as that.

Todd Harrell (Three Doors Down bassist) is a really good cat too.

PC: The guys in Three Doors Down are all really good people.

Fans think when you have a song on the radio that you're making serious smack?

SM: It's absolutely not true.

Shaun, as a closing thought, can you share your most personal lyric?

SM: All of them are personal to me. I've found that there's not one lyric that's more personal than the others. I want people to take their own meanings away from the songs. That way they can interpret all of them from their own perspective and it will mean much more to them personally. **play**



BACK OF THE BOOK

Blah, blah, blah

04_06 BRADY FIECHTER
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

AI

The idea of what infinitely defines intelligence has always fascinated me, which lead me the other day to Wikipedia and the American Psychological Association's obscure consensus that *"individuals differ from one another in their ability to understand complex ideas, to adapt effectively to the environment, to learn from experience, to engage in various forms of reasoning, to overcome obstacles by taking thought. Although these individual differences can be substantial, they are never entirely consistent: a given person's intellectual performance will vary on different occasions, in different domains, as judged by different criteria. Concepts of 'intelligence' are attempts to clarify and organize this complex set of phenomena."*

I like that I could take this quote and apply it to a programmer's ongoing endeavor when creating an artificial existence in the game space—to create characters who differ from one another in their ability to understand complex patterns, who adapt effectively to the player and the environment, who learn and engage in various forms of reasoning and overcome obstacles. The ultimate goal is to create life inside the game that is not unlike the life outside it.

As much as anything else, gamemakers are building artificial beings that we interact with. They may be virtual, but that, to me, is part of the wonder. I'm interacting with inorganic intelligence in an inorganic world that began as a line of code in a human's computer. Very cool.

If you're a gamer, you may not explicitly share my intrigue with the idea of AI, but its effect on you is there, propelling the experience. Part of what makes gaming special is the active participation with the characters. In film, you may develop a relationship with the plight of a soldier or monster or creature, but in a game, you affect that relationship. It's happening with you.

Artificial intelligence in games is still so primitive, but we are starting to see an evolution that will take the experience of gameplaying to the next level. And when I say the next level, I don't mean going from 2D to 3D, or primitive 3D to more

complex 3D. I'm talking about interacting with characters who begin to engage our senses in newly evocative ways.

Games like Half-Life have been lauded for advancements in AI, but I still see these subtle improvements as more evolutionary than the breakthroughs we might see in this latest generation of hardware.

Condemned is a good example of a different way of looking at AI. There were moments when I thought the enemy was more than just reacting to my actions; he was aware of my actions, aware of my presence.

It used to be impressive when an enemy would pick up a thrown grenade or roll out of the way. Then we got excited when enemies did more than run straight into our line of fire. Then it was cool when they started to work in teams. But what still exists in all this is indeed the artifice of the intelligence, the mechanical reactionary responses to the player in the space. Enemies are still locked in the kind of transparent patterns that flag our awareness of being in a contrived video game. Imagine how unsettling it will be when a character seems to think like you do, seems to show a sense of reason. I wonder if the kind of traditional gameplay we're used to today will change or even be weeded out as AI becomes more advanced? You look at a game like, say, Devil May Cry or God of War, and the enemies are locked into very identifiable patterns, requiring combat that is mostly predetermined, repetition-based. There exists the feeling of characters strategically placed as pawns in a constrictive game board, rather than characters possessed of intelligence, who inhabit the space with a will to survive.

Intelligence is relative. For a gamemaker, there are tricks that can be used to portray characters of intelligence, and there are ways to create those that possess true problem solving skills.

Personality and emoting are offsprings of artificial intelligence; as humans, it is our machine-like reaction to the world that forms our character and emotions, and with greater AI in games comes a growing presence of real beings offering us real interaction and, eventually, that emotion

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we talk about finding in games.

You can look at the giants in Shadow of Colossus for an idea of how a game character will engage you out of animation and movement in ways we haven't seen communicated till now; in less defined terms, that's a form of intelligence. When I consider the concept of AI, I look beyond the idea of simply writing code that makes the character move convincingly, plotting its course to serve as a formidable target range.

It's no mystery why online gaming offers a unique appeal. Humans are unpredictable, and taking on another human simply can't be matched by the characters in games. But how will we respond when the AI comes to us with a similar dimension of complexity?

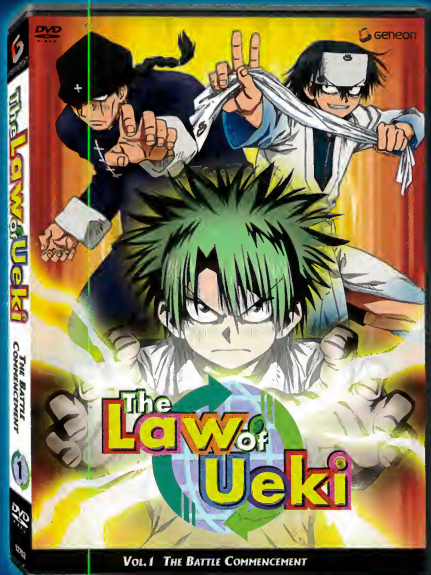
Artificial intelligence is derived from the patterns that define our own intelligence. There's more of a part of us in the virtual worlds we play than we might think. **play**

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